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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

FROM DESIGN TO IMPLEMENTATION:  
A CASE STUDY OF A NEW TWO-YEAR COLLEGE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

PROGRAM IN CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

BY  
BRIAN M KNETL

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2019

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

On February 24, 2009 President Barack Obama, in his first speech to a joint session of Congress, stated that the United States was ill prepared to meet the employment needs of the future because of unacceptably low completion rates in higher education. The President expressed concern that the United States was falling behind the rest of the world in attainment of higher education credentials, a lag that would lead to a citizenry unable to compete in a global economy. Positioned within the context of global competitiveness, the President stated that the acquisition of post-secondary training was becoming a prerequisite for young adults to be competitive in a global economy. To address the problem and establish what would become his education agenda, the President called on every American to commit to at least one year of post-secondary education or training. President Obama concluded his comments pledging to have the United States regain its top position of having the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020 (Obama, 2009).

President Obama's address echoed sentiments of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) that expressed similar concerns over the United States losing ground to other nations in educating its citizenry. *A Nation at Risk* (1983) declared, "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our

very future as a Nation and a people” (quoted in Willis, et. al. 1993, p. 403). The President’s statements, while less apocalyptic, expressed similar concerns. Decades after *A Nation at Risk* (1983), the United States was still losing ground to other nations, and the President wanted to reignite a conversation on a problem he viewed as a national priority: “But whatever the [post-secondary] training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma. And dropping out of high school is no longer an option. It’s not just quitting on yourself, it’s quitting on your country” (Obama, 2009).

President Obama’s speech came just two months after the College Board’s Commission on Access, Admissions, and Success in Higher Education published its report, “Coming to Our Senses: Education and the American Future” (College Board, 2008). The core charge of the commission was to “create a national conversation on the antecedents and root causes of diminished access to, and graduation from, higher education in society today,” and to recommend solutions about “how to achieve both higher participation and graduation rates among all the nation’s college aspirants” (College Board, 2008). The Commission drew on extensive quantitative data from the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) to address the “alarming news” that the United States ranked 21<sup>st</sup> out of 27 advanced economies in high school completion rates and dropped from 2<sup>nd</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> in college completion rates. “Coming to Our Senses” (2008) laid out the challenges facing education in the United States, identified obstacles to completion, and suggested a ten-part action plan to address falling completion rates. The Commission laid out its own challenge to higher education: for the United States to reclaim its position in the front rank of international educational

leadership by ensuring that by the year 2025, fully 55 percent of young Americans complete their schooling with a post-secondary credential.

In addition to President Obama and the College Board, two prominent foundations entered the conversation by pledging funding and support for initiatives focused on improving completion in higher education. In 2008, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation published their own target for increasing completion: “double the number of low-income students who earn a post-secondary degree or certificate by age 26 by the year 2025.” The Gates Foundation followed up with investments in organizations such as Complete College America and Compete to Complete. In 2009, the Lumina Foundation set its “Goal 2025” which announced a commitment to “increase the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees, certificates, and other credentials to 60% by 2025.” This commitment from the Lumina Foundation followed on the heels of its 2004 investment of seed money for the organization, Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count (AtD).<sup>1</sup>

These moments, individuals, organizations, and documents played an important role in thrusting the issue of post-secondary credential attainment into the national spotlight and helped usher in the movement that became known as the completion agenda which influenced much of the work of higher education over the last decade (Bailey, 2016; Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Kelly & Schneder, 2012; McClenny, 2013). Very

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<sup>1</sup> Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count (AtD) is an organization started in 2004 with funding from the Lumina Foundation to improve student outcomes, especially for academically underprepared and traditionally underserved populations. AtD currently has a membership of over 220 community colleges in 40 states ([achievingthedream.org](http://achievingthedream.org)).

simply defined, the completion agenda challenged educators, politicians, and communities to establish policies, practices, and procedures that improved the rate at which students completed a post-secondary credential. More complexly, the completion agenda was defined by initiatives implemented to enact change and the progress made toward increasing completion.

### **Community Colleges and the Completion Agenda**

All sectors of education were called upon to participate in efforts to increase completion, and community colleges were quick to respond. By April 2010, the annual conference for the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) was described by one observer in the following way: “In speeches, new campaigns, and informal discussions, the talk of the conference is completion” (Jaschik, 2010). In the days following the conference, leaders from six organizations central to community colleges united to sign “Democracy’s Colleges: A Call to Action” (2010).<sup>2</sup> The one page document recognized the critical role community colleges played in creating an educated citizenry, and included its own completion goal: “to promote the development and implementation of policies, practices, and institutional cultures that will produce fifty percent more students with high quality degrees and certificates by 2020, while increasing access and quality.”

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<sup>2</sup> “Democracy’s Colleges: A Call to Action” was signed in 2010 by leaders from the American Association of Community Colleges, the Association of Community College Trustees, the Center for Community College Engagement, the League for Innovation in the Community College, the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development, and the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society.

Months after “Democracy’s Colleges” (2010), the AACC published “The Completion Agenda: A Call to Action” (McPhail, 2011) which summarized a convening of community college leaders and laid out strategies for addressing completion in community colleges. “A Call to Action” (McPhail, 2011) drew on the combined experiences of community college leaders who were surveyed in focus groups. The qualitative data was used to generate a list of strategies, recommendations, and emergent questions that community colleges ought to consider as the work of completion moves forward. By drawing on the expertise of community college leaders, “A Call to Action” (McPhail, 2011) was an authentic and relevant document for community colleges, and provided guidance for advancing the completion agenda in the community college context. “A Call to Action” (McPhail, 2011) did not introduce a new target, but rather adopted the same target put forth by “Democracy’s Colleges” (2010) of producing fifty percent more students with high quality degrees and certificates by 2020, while increasing access and quality. Table 1 presents targets that emerged during the early stages of the completion agenda. The Table is not all inclusive, but represents targets and organizations that contributed to the early stages of the completion agenda. By 2011, it was clear that the completion agenda had become a national priority for community colleges in the United States, and AACC declared that the completion theme would guide all its work.

Table 1

*Completion Agenda Targets*

Document or Source	Year	Author/Agency	Goal/Target
“Coming to Our Senses: Education and the American Future”	2008	The College Board Commission on Access, Admission, and Success in Higher Education	Reach a goal of ensuring that by the year 2025 fully 55% of young Americans are completing their schooling with a community college degree or higher.
Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation	2008	Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation	Double the number of low-income students who earn a postsecondary degree or certificate by age 26 by the year 2025.
Lumina Foundation	2008	Lumina Foundation	Increase the percentage of Americans with high-quality degrees and credentials to 60 percent by 2025.
Presidential Address to a Joint Session of Congress	2009	President Barack Obama	Have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020.
“Democracy’s Colleges: A Call to Action”	2010	American Association of Community Colleges, Association of Community College	Produce 50% more students with high quality degrees and certificates by 2020, while increasing access and quality.

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Trustees, The Center for Community College Student Engagement, Phi Theta Kappa, National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development, and League for Innovation in the Community College			
“The Completion Agenda: A Call to Action”	2011	Christine McPhail, on behalf of AACC	Adopted the target set by “Democracy’s Colleges”

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While global competitiveness was a motivating factor for increasing completion, community colleges had additional driving forces. In his 2009 speech, President Obama noted, “half the students who begin college never finish.” The President’s comment was an understatement when community colleges were considered separately from four-year colleges and universities. According to a 2017 National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) report, less than 30% of students who enrolled in a community college completed within three years. While these numbers increase when extended beyond three years, they still remained below 50% up to six years after starting a degree program. Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker (2014) provided community college completion rates from numerous sources, and despite the variances in how completion was measured—completion rates for community colleges remained well below 50%. According to

Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person (2006) community colleges removed major barriers to accessing college, but despite this achievement the degree completion for students who began at community colleges remained disappointing. Kelly and Schneider (2012) supported this claim, “While more students than ever are getting a foot in the door [to higher education], there is little evidence that these gains in access have been accompanied by comparable increases in the rates at which students complete a degree” (p. 2). Community colleges played an important role in increasing access to higher education and providing opportunities for populations of students traditionally under-represented in higher education; however, the dismal completion rates needed to be addressed if community colleges were going to live up to its mission of increasing educational opportunity.

### **Themes of the Completion Agenda**

The completion agenda began with declarations, pledges, and long-range targets, but eventually community colleges began the process of implementing strategies designed to help students complete. The strategies were as varied and numerous as the institutions themselves; however, commonalities emerged that could be categorized by the broad themes of access, affordability, and student supports. Not all dimensions of the completion agenda were encapsulated within these three themes, but many of the efforts to increase completion focused on removing obstacles to maintain and increase access, controlling costs of tuition and fees to keep post-secondary options affordable, and implementing appropriate supports to help students through to completion.



## **Access**

Access has long been a defining feature of community colleges, and most community college leaders agreed that increased completion could not come at the expense of access (AACC, 2012; McPhail, 2011). Most community colleges in the United States operate as open access institutions providing entry to any student who completed a high school diploma or equivalent (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Scherer & Anson, 2014). Since students can enroll in most programs without meeting any admission standards, community colleges serve as an entry point into higher education for many students. To significantly increase completion rates, community colleges not only need to maintain the access they traditionally provide but need to increase access. According to “Coming to Our Senses” (College Board, 2008) and McPhail (2011), to increase completion at a high enough rate to meet the ambitious targets set by the Commission, AACC, and others, additional completion numbers needed to come from traditionally underserved students. Traditionally underserved students may be first generation students or come from a background where higher education was less of an expectation after high school, and navigating the complex processes of higher education proved to be difficult for many students and families often creating unintended obstacles to access. To maintain and increase access, community colleges must be attentive to streamlining and simplifying processes for students so that additional students can access and complete a credential.

**Affordability**

Comparatively low tuition and fees combined with the non-residential design of community colleges make them an affordable option for many students. Despite the affordability of community colleges, finances remained an often cited obstacle to completion (Advisory Committee Report, 2013; Bettinger, 2012; Mayer, Richburg-Hayes, & Diamond, 2015). The completion agenda challenged higher education to monitor the rising costs of college tuition and fees and to be sure students can afford both planned and unplanned costs during the time they are enrolled (College Board, 2008; McPhail, 2011). Financial aid and tuition structures were scrutinized during the completion agenda, and a multitude of “promise programs” emerged across the country which provide financial assistance—including free tuition in several instances—to students who meet specified criteria. Additionally, the issue of food and housing insecurity among community college students became more visible and served as a reminder that students face affordability challenges beyond the costs of tuition and fees, causing many students to leave college (Goldrick-Rab, 2017; Johnson, 2017; and Tuoti, 2017).

**Student Supports**

After enrollment, students needed support to navigate the complex demands and systems of higher education. Student support was a broad category that included traditional tutoring and counseling services long provided by community colleges as well as more recent support programs like new student orientation, early alert monitoring, first

year success courses, and other wrap around holistic supports. But supports needed to extend beyond the more conventional approaches and provide guidance where students often experience difficulty—deciphering the curricular requirements of the various degree programs offered at community colleges. Students can inadvertently stray from their degree program and enroll in courses that do not satisfy degree requirements causing unnecessary delay and expense that may result in a failure to complete a credential (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Pearson, 2006; Scott-Clayton, 2011). Scott-Clayton (2011) argued that a more structured curriculum combined with intrusive tracking and advising programs for students could positively affect completion rates of community college students. Scott-Clayton (2011) and others encouraged community colleges to address completion by providing a more structured experience for students (Bailey, 2012; Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; College Board, 2008; McPhail, 2011; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Pearson, 2006).

### **The Completion Agenda Impact**

*In Redesigning America's Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to Student Success*, Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015) stated that while community colleges have been willing and eager to implement initiatives to increase completion, the impact has been limited. The widespread efforts to reach the national targets over the last decade have proven to be minimally effective (AACC Progress Report, 2015; Bailey, 2016; Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Kelly & Schneider, 2012; Rutschow & Richburg-Hayes, 2011; Scherer & Anson, 2014; Stout, 2016). Individual institutions experienced

significant increases in completion rates,<sup>3</sup> and some progress was noted in annual reports published by the AACC. Achieving the Dream President Karen Stout (2016) noted that despite the incremental gains, the increases were not on pace to meet the ambitious national targets. Interventions often reached only a small portion of the student target population or they focused too much on the first semester a student was enrolled and did not provide ongoing support through completion. Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015) suggested that the lack of success was the result of a “light touch” approach to the ongoing interventions to increase completion, and more scaled efforts were needed to reach a larger group of students throughout their entire time in college to yield dramatic improvements (p. 10). Stout (2016) affirmed the ineffectiveness of this light touch approach when she stated, “discrete interventions focused on a singular reform . . . did not have the results required for enough students to achieve equitable progression and completion” (p. 100). Stout (2016), Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015) and others (Field, 2015; McClenney, 2016) recognized that a more radical approach with an aggressive touch was needed to address and impact completion.

### **Research Site: Alpha College**

While many interventions to improve completion were light touch approaches implemented within current practices at an existing institution, one response to the

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<sup>3</sup>Gains in completion by individual institutions have been recognized in a variety of ways, including the Aspen Institute’s Prize for Community College Excellence and the Achieving the Dream Network’s Leah Meyer Austin Award.

completion agenda moved beyond the implementation of interventions within an existing institution and offered a new model in the form of Alpha College.<sup>4</sup>

Alpha College opened in August of 2015, several years after the completion agenda became a driving force for community colleges, but it can be framed as a response to the completion agenda. Alpha College even added its own target to the completion agenda movement when a local paper from the city in which Alpha College is located shared that Alpha College had a target of 2,275 graduates by 2025. The design of Alpha College was aligned with the completion agenda themes and was intentional about providing access to an affordable education for traditionally underrepresented students in an environment that provided holistic supports from entry through completion. Table 2 positions Alpha College chronologically within the completion agenda timeline.

A detailed discussion of Alpha College is offered in Chapter IV and connects the design of the college to completion agenda themes. This section provides a description of the basic features of Alpha College when it opened in 2015.

Table 2

*Completion Agenda and Alpha College Timeline*

2008	“Coming to Our Senses: Education and the American Future”
2009	President Obama made his “2020” pledge to a joint session of Congress. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation pledged doubling credentials by 2025 The Lumina Foundation established its “Goal 2025”

<sup>4</sup> Alpha College is a pseudonym. Throughout this dissertation, pseudonyms will be used to protect the identities of those involved in this research.

2010	Community college leaders signed “Democracy’s Colleges: Call to Action.”
2011	“The Completion Agenda: A Call to Action” was published by AACC
2014	Alpha College was approved by the Board of Trustees of the parent university.
2015	
January	Alpha College received accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission and published a target of 2,275 graduates by 2025.
July	First cohort of Alpha College students attended Summer Preparation Program
August	Alpha College’s first day of classes

Alpha College is a new, small, private Liberal Arts two-year college that is a unit of a larger private university located in a large urban city. Alpha College operates as a college within the university and is housed in a building that was once home to the parent university’s Business College. Alpha College has its own faculty, staff, and administrators, but President and Provost of the parent university serve in that capacity for Alpha College.

Alpha College is small and has no intention of increasing its enrollment beyond its desired capacity of 400. All students enroll full-time, attend classes four days a week, and are placed in either a morning or afternoon cohort. The morning cohort runs from 8:00am until 12:00pm, and the afternoon cohort runs from 1:00pm until 4:00pm. While students attend classes four days a week, they are expected to be on campus all five days.

Classes run Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. Wednesdays are set aside for built in study time and advisory interactions with their faculty advisor.

The faculty of Alpha College play a dual function serving as advisors as well as teaching courses. The faculty advisors see their student advisees throughout the day as they pass from class to class in the one building school, but will also have formal meetings with them to monitor their progress; the Wednesday time is set aside to facilitate this interaction.

Alpha College is also intentional about providing students with supports that address many of the obstacles faced when pursuing a post-secondary credential. Prior to the start of the first semester, all students must participate in a Summer Preparation Program (SPP); all students are provided with breakfast and lunch each day; students are issued lap tops without any cost; a social worker and job placement specialist are on staff; and tutoring services are offered to all students.

Alpha College's curriculum is highly structured. Students who enroll in Alpha College pursue a Liberal Arts focused transfer curriculum in one of three areas: Liberal Arts, Social and Behavior Sciences, or Business. The curriculum was designed in compliance with state standards to ensure transferability to most four-year state universities. Students progress through the curriculum in either their morning or afternoon cohort. The cohort was designed to optimize student interaction and build a sense of community.

The funding model of Alpha College relies on four sources of revenue: the parent university, donor-support and fundraising, tuition, and the financial aid students receive.

The parent university covers some overhead associated with facilities, operations, and salaries. A representative from the parent university's finance office collaborates with the leadership of Alpha College to manage the allocation of funds from the parent university's budget to Alpha College's budget. Fundraising is actively pursued by the Dean and Director of Advancement to help support programs offered by Alpha College. Alpha College relies on fundraising to supplement tuition and fees. To provide a low to no debt education, Alpha College needs to enroll students who receive significant amounts of financial assistance from state and federal sources. After the financial aid is calculated, scholarships offered by Alpha College and its foundation supplement the remaining amount so that students will end up owing no money or an exceptionally small amount.

Alpha College perhaps deviates most from other two-year colleges in the nation by not operating as an open access institution. While any high school student is eligible to apply, admission to Alpha College is limited to students immediately out of high school making the student body "traditional aged" students who are recent high school graduates. After students apply they are invited to an interview. After the interview process, selected students are invited to enroll at Alpha College.

The choice to keep the enrollment of Alpha College low requires the institution to limit access; however, the limitations have allowed Alpha College to focus on a well-defined population of students. Alpha College was designed in response to a perceived lack of opportunity for low-income first-generation minority students to receive a high quality, affordable education.



### Statement of the Problem

At the most basic level, the completion agenda challenged higher education to increase the number of students who earn a post-secondary credential; however, it played out in much more complex and challenging ways. Despite the declarations, pledges, and long-range targets, and the multitude of efforts, increasing completion remained a challenge for most community colleges. According to Kelly and Schneider (2012), higher education knows very little about how to improve student success and has few proven practices to rely on—especially practices that will translate well from institution to institution. Part of the challenge for community colleges was that focusing on completion marked a significant and potentially conflicting addition to the mission of community colleges. Community college faculty, staff, and administrators always worked diligently to help students succeed, but for decades community colleges focused on increasing access to higher education and were designed to facilitate that purpose (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). Community colleges expanded course offerings and offered a flexible schedule to accommodate as many students' needs as possible. As a flexible, local, and affordable option, they were remarkably successfully in expanding access—especially for first generation, low-income, and minority populations. The focus on completion required community colleges to focus on *both* access and success. According to Bailey (2012), Baldwin (2014), and McClenney (2013), the magnitude of this change could not be underestimated.

Focusing on both access and completion posed a significant challenge for community colleges that operated (and will continue to operate) as open access

institutions. This dual focus prompted Scherer and Anson (2014) to wonder if institutions accessible to anyone with a high school diploma or equivalent (whether they were academically prepared for college level work or not) were compatible to dramatic increases in completion. If community colleges were going to maintain the access they historically provided while implementing strategies to increase completion they needed to balance these dual, sometimes competing priorities.

For this to happen, community colleges needed to engage in dramatic redesign. According to Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Pearson (2006), early proponents of completion at community colleges, this process required radical changes. Organizational structures needed to be reviewed and dramatically altered for improvements in completion to occur. In a 2014 interview, Kelly and Schneider similarly argued that to realize dramatic results, disruptive changes were needed to reinvent the current system. Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015) responded to the lack of progress by calling for a “redesign” of community colleges, and Hauptman (2012) was most direct when he stated that higher education needed to be less timid and more innovative in its approach to completion. As a system, community colleges have not been successful in rethinking their organization and operations in support of increasing completion. Whatever changes needed to be made, it was clear that business as usual would not move community colleges beyond the minimal gains that have prevailed to this point (Kelly & Schneider, 2012).

According to a local news report in August of 2017, almost exactly two years after opening its doors, Alpha College graduated over 50% of its inaugural class.

Community colleges nationally saw numbers half that amount after nearly a decade of focusing on completion.<sup>5</sup> During a time when community colleges were desperately trying to raise completion numbers with minimal success, a new institution achieved dramatically higher rates among students who were traditionally most at risk of not completing a post-secondary credential. The graduation rate of Alpha College's inaugural class elicited numerous questions about how comparatively impressive results were achieved in such a short amount of time and made Alpha College an intriguing case study for investigation within the context of the completion agenda.

Alpha College was not a redesign or a transformation, but rather a new model. As a new model, Alpha College enjoyed the luxury of being able to address completion without having to undergo dramatic institutional change or shift. As such, Alpha College served as a unique model to examine within the context of the completion agenda and how leadership made decisions about access, affordability, and student supports to increase completion. By focusing on the design and implementation, it was possible to examine how decisions made by the Administrative Leadership Team (ALT) evolved from design through implementation to specifically address the themes of access, affordability, and student supports. Like most administrations, the ALT needed to make decisions about key features of the curriculum, programs, and interventions to optimize

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<sup>5</sup>It is important to note that most comprehensive community colleges use 3-year graduation rates, not 2-year rates. The Community College Research Center, AACC, IPEDS, Nation Center for Education Statistics, and the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center all use the 3-year graduation rate; however, the 3-year graduation rate remains less than 50% nationally.

student completion. The decisions by the ALT provided insight into the challenges community colleges faced trying to balance access, affordability, and student supports; however, those decisions also revealed opportunities for community colleges to learn more about specific strategies to assist their own efforts.

Alpha College was also enticing as a site of study because it applied a single model to all its students. As suggested previously, one of the challenges of the completion agenda was reaching scale with interventions. Alpha College provided a unique opportunity to examine interventions at scale and possibly served as a microcosm of how potential initiatives operated at scale. Alpha College's novelty made it intriguing. As a new institution with a design that differed from most community colleges, Alpha College was somewhat shrouded in mystery. The local media in the urban setting where Alpha College is located was generous in its coverage, and the college received a fair share of national attention. Higher Education publications offered brief stories about Alpha College, but a detailed and critical examination of the model has not been completed. Alpha College purported to be a unique model and was referred to as a "game changer" by those involved in its design and implementation, but a detailed examination of the model was needed before the uniqueness of the model and its potential impact can be fully determined.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this research was to understand how Alpha College functioned within the context of and as a response to the completion agenda through a single case study.

This research focused specifically on the ALT of Alpha College and decisions that group made to address issues of completion during implementation of the college's design. The focus on the ALT was a response to two factors related to this research. First, challenges related to the completion agenda are often attributed to a lack of institutional focus on completion (Bailey, 2016; Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Stout, 2016). McClenney (2016) argued "nothing short of institutional transformation would be required to move the needle on student success" (p. 7). Acknowledging that the transformation needed was an enormous challenge for community colleges, McClenney asserted that strong leadership was required to lead a college's culture to focus on completion. Stout (2016) affirmed McClenney's stance when she argued that leaders at all levels needed to commit to a focus on completion. Increased completion cannot be achieved with only pockets of engagement within the college. Leaders must establish a culture in which all faculty and staff as well as policies and practices were aligned to address completion. By focusing on the ALT of Alpha College, the role leadership plays in completion during the implementation of the Alpha College model became central to the study.

Second, prior to beginning this research, I was provided with access to the ALT of Alpha College as a member of a separate research project. I participated in the research project as a graduate student and was invited to be a member of the research team because I served as an administrator at a comprehensive community college in a large suburban district. Much of my professional work focused on making decisions about programs, policies, and procedures to increase student completion. As an observer and

practicing community college administrator, I was struck by the opportunities the ALT had to make decisions without restraints of past practice or a faculty and staff entrenched in conventional practices; however, I was equally struck by how evident it became that Alpha College administrators shared the same challenges and frustrations in their decision making as community colleges administrators across the country. Based on my experience observing the ALT, I developed an interest in further study on Alpha College and how the leadership of a new institution addressed issues associated with completion and how the new model of Alpha College provided opportunities for innovative decisions while revealing challenges to balance access, affordability, and student supports

### **Research Questions**

The following research question and sub-questions informed this research:

1. What decisions made by the Administrative Leadership Team during the implementation of Alpha College addressed completion agenda themes of access, affordability, and student supports to provide low to no debt education to low-income minority students?
  - a. How did the Administrative Leadership Team's decision making process function?
  - b. What issues emerged of primary concern to the Administrative Leadership Team to increase completion?
  - c. What decisions made by the Administrative Leadership Team during implementation deviated from the initial design of Alpha College in

order to directly address completion? Do any decisions to deviate demonstrate a prioritization of completion over other competing goals?

- d. How did the Administrative Leadership Team make decisions to create a culture focused on completion?

### **Uses of the Study**

The significance of this research can be related in large part to the lack of success of the completion agenda. Community colleges have struggled to increase completion rates, but Alpha College managed to post impressive numbers in just two years. While case studies by design are limited in their ability to generalize and Alpha College is very different in size and scope from comprehensive community colleges, there are lessons from the practices and decisions made during the first two years of Alpha College's operation that have applicability to other community colleges as they continue to address completion struggles within their own context. While Alpha College's design features cannot be duplicated by most community colleges, specific features may be adopted for local use. Additionally, this study may provide guidance to any new replication efforts that may result from interest in Alpha College's model.

Observations from Bailey (2016), McClenney (2016), and Stout (2016) about the need to implement initiatives at scale to affect change was another contribution of this study. Because of its singular mission, Alpha College implemented its model at scale—essentially providing a common experience for all its students. The model is small and different from comprehensive community colleges, but insights are gleaned from

understanding the challenges and successes of an institution that provided a focused, scaled experience within the context of the completion agenda.

While a lot has been written about the completion agenda and the various initiatives institutions implemented to address completion, very little has been written about Alpha College. As a new institution, a detailed, critical examination of its model was needed to present an understanding of how it was designed and implemented. The focus of this research presented that understanding from the perspective of leadership. The results of this study were likely to be of most interest to administrators at community colleges who desired to gain a unique perspective on the complexities of balancing access, affordability, and student supports to address completion.

This chapter provided an overview of the completion agenda and how this research proposed to examine Alpha College within the context of and as a response to the completion agenda. The next chapter provides a review of literature related to the completion agenda and establishes the themes of access, affordability, and student supports that will be used throughout this study.



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

To understand how a study of Alpha College contributes to the research on the completion agenda, it is important to consider existing research. This review begins with a discussion of completion agenda themes relevant to this study: access, affordability, and student supports. Each is considered within the context of community colleges and how the completion agenda challenged and affirmed the role of each theme. Key movements within the completion agenda movement are examined, especially those with important connections to the design of Alpha College. Next, progress towards and problems associated with meeting the goals of the completion agenda are examined. Third, the role leadership played in advancing the completion agenda and implementing comprehensive and scaled reform is presented. Finally, the discussion returns to Alpha College and how the implementation of a new two-year college can provide a deep understanding of the new college and contribute unique insights into completion efforts. During the consideration of Alpha College, the case of Guttman Community College (GCC) is considered as a comparable response to the completion agenda. GCC is a community college part of the City University of New York (CUNY) system that opened in 2012. Like Alpha College, GCC was designed as a response to and within the context of the completion agenda. Bailey (2016) argued that GCC provided unique insight into

completion agenda initiatives because of its intentional infusion of completion agenda practices that have shown to be effective. GCC provides a good introduction for the case study of Alpha College.

### **Themes of the Completion Agenda**

Not all initiatives that emerged from the completion agenda were connected to access, affordability, and student supports. While other themes were not addressed in detail during this study, they were important considerations when addressing completion in community colleges. For example, the need for policy changes at the local, state and federal level were necessary for addressing completion. Everything from mandating more accountability in student outcomes to higher standards for K-12 counselors were suggested policy changes (College Board, 2008). Increased K-16 collaboration and the seamless movement across educational sectors was promoted through various completion agenda initiatives. Higher education and the K-12 system were encouraged to collaborate and align both the curriculum and standards for college and career readiness. The potential benefits of K-16 collaboration and alignment included providing students at an early age with a clear path from high school (or younger) through to a post-secondary credential. The argument was that if students saw a path, they were likely to be more motivated to finish (College Board, 2008). Additionally, an alignment of standards from K-12 into higher education had the potential to increase the preparedness of students coming into higher education and reduced the students who drop off (McPhail, 2011). New approaches to teaching and learning were encouraged as part of the completion

agenda. “Coming to Our Senses” (College Board, 2008) stated that teachers were the key to excellence in education, and “an educational system can be no better than its teachers” (p. 61). “A Call to Action” (McPhail, 2011) positioned teaching and learning as a potential obstacle to increasing completion if advancements were not pursued, and suggested that there were factors within the control of administration, students, and faculty that could go a long way to improving classroom practice with a positive impact on completion. Faculty led initiatives to assess and change classroom practices to impact student success was one of the most promising ways to impact completion, and this theme appeared regularly within the completion agenda literature.

These themes are important to consider when consciously attempting to impact completion. Several initiatives were implemented to impact policy, increase K-16 collaboration, and interrogate classroom practice; however, these themes were not within the scope of my research on Alpha College or the decision making of the ALT. The primary themes of access, affordability, and student supports were most relevant to a deep understanding of Alpha College within the context of the completion agenda and receive further attention.

## **Access**

Access evolved to become a defining feature of community colleges and a sacred part of their mission. Advocates of the completion agenda were adamant about the need to maintain and increase access. Despite concerns that access might be compromised to increase completion, most community colleges held true to protecting the open door practices of community colleges. Some critics of the open door practice suggested that

completion and open access may be incompatible and urged leaders to consider easing closed the open door.

**Access and the open door mission.** To understand the importance of access to community colleges, it is necessary to know that access was not always a defining feature of community colleges (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Ratcliff, 1994; Scherer & Anson, 2014). When community colleges first emerged as “junior colleges” in the early twentieth-century, they were designed to serve high school graduates with a curriculum that mirrored the first two years of a university education “identical in scope and thoroughness, with corresponding courses of the standard four-year college” (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014, p. 4). During the early development of community colleges, the intended audience was college-bound students. The pre-baccalaureate, college-bound curriculum remained the focus until the mid-1920s when the American Association for Junior Colleges (AAJC) expanded its definition of these institutions and suggested that in addition to offering the first two years of a four-year degree, they could offer “a different type of curriculum suited to the larger and ever-changing . . . needs of the entire community” (quoted in Gleazer, 1994, p. 17). By permitting curriculum that appealed to a wider audience than college-bound baccalaureate students, these institutions became accessible to students seeking different post-secondary goals. During the 1920s and 1930s, the junior college slowly transitioned into a more “community-centric” college, and leaders began to re-envision the mission of these institutions (Gleazer, 1994).

President Truman's Commission on Higher Education (1947) called for the continued expansion of two-year schools into a national network of community colleges to help expand access to higher education (Anson & Scherer, 2014; Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Gilbert & Heller, 2013; Gleazer, 1994). The Commission envisioned a set of "community-responsive" colleges fully integrated into their region to meet a variety of post-secondary educational needs beyond the traditional baccalaureate transfer curriculum offered by junior colleges including terminal vocational education and continuing adult education (Gilbert & Heller, 2013). The Truman Commission would mark a turning point in the history of community colleges. After the 1947 Commission, the number of community colleges increased dramatically and enrollment spiked, especially among minority populations. By 1960 student enrollment at community colleges was close to 500,000, but by 2010 it had increased to over 7.5 million, and 42% of community college enrollments nationwide in 2010 were minority students (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). Community colleges served a large percentage of minority students, and Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker (2014) suggested that community colleges made a significant contribution in providing access to higher education for more students. Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015) went further and suggested that the community colleges that emerged in the 1960s were extraordinarily successful in expanding college enrollments. The contribution that community colleges made to increasing access to higher education cannot be underestimated (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). The direction of the completion agenda in community colleges was to not only maintain the

open access, but to advance efforts to increase access so that completion efforts did not come at the expense or sacrifice of access.

**Access to increase completion.** “Coming to Our Senses” (College Board, 2008) was adamant about removing obstacles that prevented access to higher education for all students and called for the simplification of difficult to navigate admissions and financial aid processes. These were improvements identified within the report with the potential to increase access to higher education. “Deomocracy’s Colleges,” (2010), echoed the same sentiment; the community college leaders who signed the document committed to meet the challenges of the completion agenda “while holding firmly to traditional values of access, opportunity, and quality.” “Reclaiming the American Dream” (AACC, 2012) stated that the completion agenda work needed to be accomplished while holding strong to the “open-door mission” of the community college, and to move in any direction that “abandoned the open door would be to betray the historic mission of these institutions” (p. 20).

But maintaining access was not enough to accomplish the goals of the completion agenda. Increased access, especially for traditionally underserved populations, was also needed. “Coming to Our Senses” (College Board, 2008) stated that access must be increased for traditionally underserved populations to meet the goal of ensuring that 55% of young Americans left school with a community college degree or higher by 2025. Bailey (2012) and Hauptman (2012) offered the same argument, recognizing that in the United States, non-minority, middle-class or above students who came from a family

where others have attended college were already more likely to access and complete a post-secondary credential than low-income, traditionally underserved populations. To reach the ambitious completion targets, populations of students needed to be engaged that were previously not engaged in post-secondary education. To this end, conscious efforts were needed to ensure access for students who still struggle to gain access.

Despite the commitment to maintaining and increasing access, concerns about the potential impact a focus on completion might have on access were expressed by community college leaders. “A Call to Action” (McPhail, 2011) included a section on emergent questions. As the focus groups considered strategies for addressing completion, questions emerged, including “Will the completion agenda restrict access” (p. 9)? Despite the long-standing commitment of community colleges to providing open access and the reaffirmation of that commitment, a community college leader expressed concern about possible unintended consequences of a strong focus on completion. Bragg and Durham (2012) addressed this potential conflict when they suggested, “the allure of raising completion rates by reducing access of students thought unprepared for college and incapable of finishing is too attractive to deny” (p. 120). Bragg and Durham (2012) did not suggest closing the open door, but rather worried about the potential for community colleges to restrict access to increase completion. Like others, Bragg and Durham (2012) argued adamantly that maintaining access is key for community colleges to not only fulfill their mission but to increase completion rates.

**Access and the completion agenda.** While most community colleges were not going to sacrifice access at the expense of completion, some critics suggested that open

door access and increasing completion were incompatible and that the time might be right to re-examine the practice. The re-examination of open access was most comprehensively addressed by Scherer and Anson (2014) in *Community Colleges and the Access Affect: Why Open Admissions Suppresses Achievement*. Scherer and Anson questioned the conventional notion that open access produces only opportunity and positivity (Fain, 2014). They argued that the open access traditionally provided by community colleges, when coupled with the advent of the completion agenda, fosters a “completion at any cost” approach (Scherer & Anson, 2014, p. 27). Scherer and Anson (2014) posited that community colleges were inherently challenged to increase completion due to their open access since anyone with a high school diploma or equivalent can gain entry into a community college whether they demonstrate academic preparedness or not. The lack of admissions standards, they argued, did not set students up for success and went a long way to explain low completion rates in community colleges. While the completion agenda hoped to improve low completion rates, Scherer and Anson (2014) suggested it could have adverse effects on the academic standards of community colleges. Students who accessed higher education through the open door of community colleges risked being ushered through to completion with policies and initiatives that compromised academic standards. The focus on accelerating (or even eliminating) developmental education, providing incentive funding for increased completion rates, and implementing student supports that “reach down to shepherd” students through to completion did not challenge or prepare them for the rigors of college course work (Scherer & Anson, 2014, p. 115). The pursuit of completion at any cost strained the academic standards of



community colleges and sacrificed student learning for completion. Scherer and Anson (2014) argued that community colleges needed to ease close the door to open access and be willing to sacrifice the sacredness of open access to increase both completion and academic standards in community colleges through the implementation of entry requirements. Scherer and Anson (2014) argued that closing the open door, if coupled with better use of funding, engagement with secondary partners, and stronger academic programs, was likely to have the most significant impact on student completion.

Advocates of the completion agenda argued that open access, completion, and high academic standards were not mutually exclusive; however, Scherer and Anson (2014) captured the tension that characterized concerns about maintaining an open door during a movement focused on completion. Others shared similar concerns, but offered a more measured approach and stopped short of suggesting closing the open door. In “Rethinking the Completion Agenda” (2013) Sanford Shugart, president of Valencia College and a respected leader in community college education, acknowledged the legitimacy of concerns expressed about the focus on completion and its relationship to academic standards. Shugart’s primary concern with the completion agenda was the potential of promoting the false notion that completion equates with learning. Shugart challenged the logic that the nation will be better off after more students complete a post-secondary degree or credential:

The theory is subtly, but clearly incorrect. It should go like this: If more students learned more deeply and effectively in a systematic program of study, with a clearer sense of purpose in their studies and their lives, more would graduate and

contribute to the local economy and community, and that would be a good thing (p. 23).

Shugart argued that deep learning, not completion, needs to be the end. While Shugart was not as harsh and provocative in challenging the completion agenda and he in no way advocated for changing the open access practices of community colleges, he did capture the same tensions arising from a focus on both open access and completion. More importantly, Shugart (2013) nicely reframed the tension to advocate for the continued focus on high academic standards and learning during the completion movement.

Debra Humphreys (2012) offered a similar criticism in “What’s Wrong with the Completion Agenda—And What We Can Do About It.” Humphreys expressed concern that a focus on completion risked inadvertently shifting focus away from learning.

Humphreys acknowledged that while advocates of the completion agenda were not deliberately compromising academic standards—it did pose a potential risk. Humphreys did not suggest closing the open door, but served as another voice for concerns over the slippery slope of focusing on completion and access and the extent to which rigor and learning could be compromised (Bragg & Durham, 2012; Fain, 2016; O’Banion, 2010).

The process of increasing and maintaining access at community colleges posed a challenge during the completion agenda. Enrollment at community colleges across the nation was declining slowly but steadily since 2010. From 2006-2010, enrollment at community colleges increased due to a recession that brought people back to school, but after the peak in 2010, enrollment began a steady decline. According to a 2015 progress report from AACC, enrollment at community colleges fell 8% from 2010 to 2013, and

another report from AACC in February 2017 shows a decrease of 9.6% from 2013 to 2016. The AACC declared in its February 2017 report that the decreasing enrollment will “affect community college efforts to reach their completion agenda.”

### **Affordability**

Affordability is a defining feature of community colleges. The geographic and economic accessibility of community colleges made them an affordable choice for all students, but especially for low-income students. The rising costs of higher education challenged community college’s efforts to continue offering a quality education at an affordable price. During the completion agenda, community colleges were challenged to control costs and advance efforts to develop financial supports that better accommodated students during their pursuit of a post-secondary credential. Some efforts implemented to overcome the challenge of affordability had some positive results for students, but the overall impact on completion remained unclear.

**Affordability and the rising costs of higher education.** Supported by local and state funding, community college tuition costs are considerably less expensive than four year options, and most people in the United States live within close proximity to a community college which made attending college possible without the need for a residential component (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). This affordability made community colleges an attractive option for low-income students, but despite this affordability, community colleges were not immune to the financial challenges faced by higher education. According to the 2010 report, “The Rising Price of Inequality” by the Advisory Committee of Student Financial Assistance (ACSFSA), the primary challenge

facing affordability in higher education was that increases in financial support for students did not keep pace with increasing costs of higher education and inflation. The report argued that while Pell grants and other need-based funding increased, it did so at a slower rate than tuition and fees at most public and private colleges and universities. Additionally, the average family income did not increase at an equitable pace with the cost of higher education (College Board, 2008). The disproportionate growth in the costs of higher education, need-based funding, and family income was taking a toll on community colleges and low-income families (Marcus, 2017; Scott-Clayton, 2017).

Colleges and universities were increasing tuition and fees to make up for lost funding from federal and state sources that were steadily cut for the last decade (ACSFA, 2013; Marcus, 2017; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2015; Scott-Clayton, 2017). Community colleges are funded primarily from three sources: tuition, local taxes, and state revenue. The proportion of funding from each varies from state to state, but the percentage from each source fluctuates often and becomes increasingly difficult to predict. As spending on higher education was cut, community colleges responded by increasing the most predictable and controllable source of income: tuition and fees (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). But the increased tuition and fees often resulted in minimal financial gains for the institution as enrollment in community colleges experienced a downward trend over the last decade (AACC, 2017), and since community colleges enrolled a large number of low-income students, increasing costs had the potential to become prohibitive for many students and restrict their access. The rising cost of higher education not only

impacted access, but also the ability of students to persist through college to completion (Mayer, Richburg-Hayes, & Diamond, 2015; Scott-Clayton, 2017).

**Affordability and the cost of completion.** Community college leaders identified affordability as a primary obstacle to completion. Two of the ten recommendations put forth in “Coming to Our Senses” (College Board, 2008) were directly linked to college affordability. One of the recommendations called for more need-based grant aid and a second simply stated: “keep college affordable” (p. 11). Maintaining affordability was established as essential to reaching the completion agenda targets that were set. Additional completion numbers needed to come from more low-income students, but for low-income students, the rising cost of higher education posed a “formidable obstacle” (College Board, 2008, p. 37) and additional need-based funding needed to be available. “Coming to Our Senses” (College Board, 2008) argued that financial support needed to be more than simply available, it needed to be more predictable. Many families, especially first generation or low-income families, “need assurances they can finance [an] education before they are willing to apply” (College Board, 2008, p. 35). Because the financial aid application process can be complex and confusing, because the costs of tuition and fees are not “locked-in”, and because financial aid is dispersed after application, many students and families were unwilling to even apply for college without some predictability as to the total cost of college from admission to completion (Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, & Sanbonmatsu, 2009). This reality prompted a move towards considering “net costs” of attendance at colleges and universities (ACSFA, 2010; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2015). Defined by Page and Scott-Clayton (2015) as “not just

tuition and fees, but also costs of books, transportation, food and housing, and subtracting out grant aid” (p. 6). Keeping college affordable needed to include more creative strategies to cover the net costs. Even for students who received aid adequate enough to fund tuition and fees, unexpected costs often arose outside those associated with tuition and fees. “Coming to Our Senses” (College Board, 2008) recommended rethinking student aid to support students once they arrive and access higher education with supplementary funds. Unexpected costs were often those that delayed and deferred completion.

Attention to net costs brought more visibility to food and housing insecurity issues on college campuses (Byrne, 2017; Dewey, 2018; Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, Schneider, Hernandez, & Cady, 2018; Johnson, 2017; Tuoti, 2017;). In a study conducted by the Wisconsin HOPE Lab (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, Schneider, Hernandez, & Cady, 2018), data from surveys of over 43,000 students suggested that the basic food and housing needs of many community college and four-year university students were not met. The study demonstrated there was a negative impact on grades, persistence, and completion among students who reported food and housing insecurity; however, the academic preparedness and aspirations of these students were high, indicating a correlation between decreasing academic performance and food and housing insecurity. The report argued for addressing the issues and offering resources since students who suffered from food and housing insecurity were likely to be more successful if appropriately supported. The report pointed out that while most communities in the areas where the surveys were administered had public assistance for students, most did not take

advantage of the services. Students reported being uncomfortable or embarrassed being served within the community or campus where they were enrolled. Overcoming this stigma provided an additional challenge in addressing this obstacle. The report clearly demonstrated that community college, low-income and minority students were disproportionately affected by food and housing insecurity.

**Affordability and the completion agenda.** To understand how affordability impacts completion, it is important to consider research on the relationship between financial resources and student access, persistence, and completion. Bettinger (2012) concluded that a correlation existed between increased financial resources of a student and likelihood of that student accessing higher education and persisting through to completion. But Bettinger (2012) called the relationship ambiguous. While Bettinger (2012) found a positive impact on the relationship between increased financial aid, enrollment, and access: “the evidence on the effectiveness of aid is mixed, with some more recent causal analyses suggesting that aid has a small positive effect on enrollment” (p. 160). Bettinger’s (2012) conclusion suggested that affordability of higher education had more of an impact on access than completion. In fact, Bettinger (2012) referred to financial aid as a “blunt instrument” for improving completion and challenged the ability of financial aid reform to dramatically increase completion rates.

Similar conclusions were reached in a 2015 MDRC report on student financial assistance, college access and completion (Mayer, Richburg-Hayes, & Diamond). Mayer, Richburg-Hayes, and Diamond (2015) suggested a correlation between the financial resources of a student and likelihood of college success. While they argued that this

correlation exists, they were quick to point out the challenge of using the information to draw a causal relationship between student finances and college success: “[I]t is challenging to determine whether financial aid does in fact improve student success, because the factors associated with financial need, such as low family income, are also associated with a lack of academic success, making it difficult to isolate the effect of additional financial aid on student achievement” (p. 1). The MDRC findings ultimately aligned with those of Bettinger (2012) challenging the ability of financial assistance reforms as a clear way to increase completion; however, Bettinger (2012) did not suggest abandoning the pursuit of improving affordability. Bettinger (2012) suggested that current reforms related to improving affordability were not dramatic enough to determine if they were having an impact on student success. If more creative and generous policies were implemented, a clearer picture of how financial assistance can support completion may emerge. Some scholars warned that the pursuit of dramatic reform in financial aid should be approached carefully when considered within the context of completion since the impact may be minimal (Advisory Committee on Financial Assistance, 2013; Bettinger, 2012; Mayer, Richburg-Hayes, & Diamond, 2015; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2015).

### **Student Supports**

Community college students, as a group, differ from other college students in some important ways. They often face obstacles that students attending selective enrollment colleges and universities do not face. These obstacles have been addressed by community colleges for as long as they have existed through student support services.



Advocates of the completion agenda argued that these supports needed to continue, but must be continued in a more structured and intrusive manner. Intrusive and intensive advising, developmental education reform, student success courses, and the implementation of guided pathways were all put forward as key completion agenda initiatives.

**Student supports and the community college student.** Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker (2014) noted that community college students differ from students who attend four-year, residential universities. More often, students in community colleges struggle to fit their post-secondary pursuits into schedules that include work, family, commutes, and other obligations. Students at four-year universities are not immune to these commitments and the associated struggles, but community college students are more likely to face these challenges. According to a 2017 AACC fact sheet, of the 12.2 million students that enrolled in community colleges across the country, 62% of full-time students reported being employed at least part-time and 73% of part-time students reported being employed (it is worth noting that 62% of community college students enroll part-time). 17% of community college students are single parents, and since only 27% of community colleges offer limited housing options, most students commute to and from campus (AACC, 2017).

In addition to challenges associated with employment, family obligations, and commuting, community college students are more likely to be unfamiliar with the culture of attending college. 36% of community college students are first generation students (AACC, 2017). Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Pearson (2006) argued that navigating the

often complex college admissions, registration, and financial aid processes were among the most severe and overlooked obstacles for students. These processes, Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Pearson suggested, were difficult to navigate for all students, but first generation students were more disadvantaged compared to students from families in which others attended college.

Community colleges enroll large numbers of traditionally underserved students. While 41% of all undergraduates in the United States attend community colleges, the number of traditionally underserved students are disproportionally represented in community colleges. According to a 2017 report from the AACC, of all Native American undergraduates, 56% were enrolled in community colleges, 52% of Hispanic undergraduates were enrolled in community colleges, and 43% of all African-American undergraduates were enrolled in community colleges (AACC, 2017). Completion numbers decreased across higher education, and the chances of decreased completion among these underserved populations becomes significantly higher (Bailey, 2012; Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Pearson, 2006). The lack of completion among traditionally underserved populations posed a challenge to reaching completion targets because as was been noted prior, “any increase in college attainment will have to involve these [traditionally underserved] students” (Bailey, 2016, p. 76).

In addition to some of these other challenges, the majority of community college students are academically unprepared for college-level coursework (Bailey, 2012; Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Pearson, 2006, Scherer & Anson, 2014). According to 2010 data from the Community

College Research Center (CCRC), over 60% of students who began at a two-year public college required at least one developmental course. Students who began in developmental course work were not only less likely to earn a credential, they were less likely to persist through any of their developmental coursework; less than 50% of students who began in developmental course work completed their sequence of required developmental courses (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010).

These challenges provided significant obstacles to completion for community college students. These challenges have been traditionally addressed by community colleges through a variety of student support services that evolved over time in an effort to best support the diverse and changing needs of community college students (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; Creamer, 1994; Matson, 1994). While the full history of student development in community colleges falls beyond the scope of what needs to be covered here, it is important to know that many of the student support services that became important during the completion agenda played a role in community colleges since their inception (Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker, 2014; Matson, 1994). Advising was always available to students to assist with course selection and to help students navigate the campus. Advising supports were eventually expanded to address non-academic areas such as stress, depression, and other life skills. Courses and experiences designed for first year students as extended orientations have been offered for decades. The experiences in these courses provided students with important information about college success and helped set the expectations for the students' time at the college. Tutoring, early alert systems (or progress reports), support for registration, and career counseling were

integrated into the fabric of community colleges over the decades—they were not first developed with the emergence of the completion agenda.

Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker (2014) suggested that the challenge with student support was that the research on the impact of those services on success was not well-evolved, and community college administrators have been reluctant to provide additional funding for supports when the results cannot be quantified. While students reported higher levels of satisfaction when engaged in support services offered by community colleges, the demonstrable results on completion were not evident. Another challenge was that student supports offered by community colleges were provided to students as they choose to take advantage of them, but most were not mandatory. Even when student supports have shown positive results, more students were less likely to benefit from them if not mandated.

**Student supports and increased structure and intrusiveness.** “Coming to Our Senses” (College Board, 2008) focused on creating “a culture on campus that included the expectation that every admitted student will, in fact, graduate” (p. 73), and part of developing the culture was putting supports in place to help students successfully navigate the “large and complex enterprise that is American higher education” (p. 31). The report criticized practices of higher education that presented obstacles to access and completion without enough processes to help students move beyond those obstacles. Recognizing that better, clearer processes for students will not in and of itself increase completion rates, “Coming to Our Senses” (College Board, 2008) made other recommendations for student supports including providing students with more targeted

advising and not shying away from making mandatory demands on students for participation in various support programs designed to help them succeed.

“A Call to Action” (McPhail, 2011) offered a list of several initiatives to enhance student supports: improved advising structures and systems, the implementation of early alert systems to identify struggling students, the creation of first year experience courses, and providing a more simplified and structured curriculum for students (p. 3).

Throughout the document, McPhail (2011) offered examples of current practices at community colleges and organizations that were helping to advance completion; however, very few of the current practices addressed the supports that the document suggested needed to be implemented to increase completion. The implication of this disconnect between current practice and suggested reforms was that for many community colleges these supports may not be in place, or if they are, they may not be well structured, or may involve community colleges implementing new processes and procedures to support students.

**Student supports and the completion agenda.** The following were common initiatives that emerged during the completion agenda to directly address enhancing student supports.

***Intrusive and intensive advising.*** Various student supports were implemented to help students move toward completion. Among the most common was the implementation of intrusive and intensive advising models (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Kalamkarian, Karp, & Ganga, 2017; Karp, Kalamkarian, Klempin & Fletcher, 2016). The premise behind the use of intrusive and intensive advising was to implement

an advising structure in community colleges that extended beyond voluntary advising. As Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker (2014) pointed out, student advising was a common feature of community colleges for a long time, but was rarely mandatory for students. Mandatory advising was typically limited to students during the first semester or year of enrollment or for students on academic probation. The intrusive and intensive advising model suggested that every student was assigned to an advisor and required students to meet with that advisor at designated check points throughout the year. While most of these advising programs were too new to demonstrate conclusive results on completion, Kalamkarian, Karp, and Ganga (2017) suggested that intrusive and intensive advising models were showing some lasting and sustained effect on student persistence and completion. To better understand how this approach to advising can impact student success, the Community College Research Center (CCRC) announced in January of 2018 that they will conduct a long-term study to evaluate the effects of this advising model.

***First year success courses.*** The implementation of first year success courses increased during the completion agenda. Commonly referred to as First Year Seminars, First Year Experiences, College 101, or some similar course title, these courses were identified by Kuh (2008) as a high impact instructional practice, and were designed to provide students with an experience to transition them successfully to and through college. There were multiple approaches to these courses, and everything from summer preparation programs, extended orientations, and contextualized study skills courses emerged as variations of these experiences (Greenfield, Keup, & Gardner, 2013). Despite their proliferation, Karp (2016) concluded that the effect of these courses on completion

was limited. While students who enrolled in these courses showed higher semester-to-semester persistence rates and earned more credits while in college than students who do not enroll in these courses, the impact on completion remained unclear. These courses were typically taken early in the student's experience (often the first semester) and it was difficult to know, even with control groups, if the courses impacted completion rather than other factors. Likewise, Cuseo's (2015) comprehensive investigation into the impact of first year courses concluded that participation in a first year success course demonstrated increased semester to semester persistence, higher GPA, higher number of credits earned, and higher rates of completion. Cuseo (2015) argued that more research needed to be done to fully determine the impact of these courses on these metrics as opposed to other contributing factors such as motivation and socio-economic status; however, Cuseo (2015) acknowledged that courses that focused on content beyond orientation and infused a more holistic approach demonstrated better results. The success of this approach was supported in a case study of a first year success course offered at Bronx Community College. Karp (2016) looked at BCC's first year course and discovered that when the college redesigned the course to move beyond an extended orientation and included academic content, more sustained success was achieved. While the impact on completion of first year success courses is debatable, it is possible that if these courses are designed to address more than information sharing and orientation-related topics, they could have a more sustained and lasting impact (Cuseo, 2015; Karp, 2016).

*Developmental education reform.* One of the most controversial movements during the completion agenda was the reform of developmental education. Developmental education offers support for students underprepared for college level work by providing them with pre-college level coursework in math, English, or writing to remediate any deficiencies. Developmental education reform became common during the completion agenda largely as a result of a 2012 study from completion advocates, Complete College America, “Remediation: Higher Education’s Bridge to Nowhere”. According to the report, the proliferation of developmental coursework in higher education posed a significant obstacle to completion. Students who began at a community college and enrolled in developmental courses were most at risk of not completing. According to the report, over 60% of students who enrolled in community colleges took at least one developmental course. Of those 60%, only 10% progressed to earn a credential. Similar findings were reported in a 2016 study from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) and a 2018 joint report from the Education Commission of the States and the Center for the Analysis of Postsecondary Readiness. The lack of completion among students who began in developmental coursework spurred skepticism about the efficacy of these offerings and a close and careful rethinking of developmental education became a common feature of the completion agenda (Bailey, 2009; Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Bettinger, Boatman, & Long, 2013; Kurlaender & Howell, 2012; and Levin & Calcagno, 2008).

Community colleges across the nation responded to the call for developmental education reform in numerous ways. First, many colleges reviewed placement policies.



Students were typically placed into developmental coursework based on standardized tests, but research demonstrated that the placement process was not effective in properly identifying developmental students and often over placed students into these courses (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Venezia & Hughes, 2014). As a result, many community colleges used the research to adjust placement scores; some moved toward using multiple methods of placement beyond a single standardized test (including high school GPA and other test scores); and others allowed students on the margins of developmental coursework to enroll in a college-level course with embedded instructional support (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Venezia & Hughes, 2014). Second, some states eliminated developmental coursework entirely (Anson & Scherer, 2014; Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins, 2015; Long, 2012). The NCES called the positive effects of developmental education “equivocal” at best (NCES, 2016, p. 5), and since the long-term effects of developmental education were inconclusive, states and institutions eliminated developmental courses and placed students directly into college-level coursework. In most instances, these students were provided with embedded supports in the form of tutoring or extended contact time with the instructor.

Venzia and Hughes (2014) suggested that the reform approach to developmental education shifted the view of these courses from a support system for unprepared students to an obstacle to completion. Critics of the developmental education reforms argued that developmental education was unfairly being cast in a negative light. Anson and Scherer (2014) were direct in their criticism of developmental education reform arguing that Complete College America created a panic and sensationalized the crisis in

developmental education without thoughtfully considering what the benefits of developmental education were in addition to the limits. Most who criticized the drastic reforms in developmental education, recognized the limits of developmental education, but suggested that more research was needed to determine which students might benefit from developmental education, and that if community colleges were going to continue to operate as open access institutions, maintaining a strong developmental education program would be essential (Anson & Scherer, 2014; Boylan, 2002).

***Guided pathways.*** The concept behind the guided pathways initiative was straightforward: if students identified an area of study early and were provided with a structured curriculum pathway for that area, they were more likely to complete (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Scott-Clayton, 2011; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Pearson, 2006). The structured curriculum pathway provided the student with a clear map of what courses were needed during each semester—each course counting toward earning a credential. The argument for guided pathways built on research by Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Pearson (2006) and Scott-Clayton (2011). Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Pearson (2006) argued that when community colleges expanded access, they developed a wide array of courses to accommodate the various goals of students, but did not provide the necessary supports to help students navigate the growing curricular choices. Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Pearson (2006) suggested that community college students were more likely to enter higher education unprepared to make choices about course selection and are most vulnerable for making uninformed choices that can delay or derail completion of a credential. To support the argument, Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and

Pearson (2006) compared completion rates of students in public comprehensive community colleges with students in private, for-profit institutions that provided students with fewer choices for course selection and found that students in institutions with a more prescribed curriculum completed at a higher rate.

Scott-Clayton (2011) was among the first to advocate for the guided pathways movement in “The Shapeless River: Does a Lack of Structure Inhibit Students’ Progress at Community Colleges?” She offered the hypothesis that students would complete at a higher rate if they were provided a structured curriculum that offered few choices and reduced the chances for students to deviate from their intended academic goals. Drawing on research from marketing, economics, and psychology, Scott-Clayton (2011) argued that in the presence of too many choices, individuals became overwhelmed and either made hasty, uniformed, or less satisfying choices, or deferred making a choice at all. Scott-Clayton (2011) suggested that many of the decision-making processes in everyday life are mirrored in community colleges, and, she argued, students were faced with too many curricular choices and lacked support to make informed choices.

There is limited evidence to support the claims of guided pathways research, but despite the limited evidence the guided pathways movement has grown significantly with multiple community colleges implementing some form of guided pathways model (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). *Redesigning Community Colleges: A Clearer Path to College Success* (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015) argued that the next phase of redesign in the community college needed to include the implementation of guided pathways in community colleges across the country. Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015) argued that

community colleges needed to move from a “cafeteria-style” model in which students were offered a large menu of options to choose from to a more structured “guided pathways” model with fewer options. Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015) provided details on how community colleges needed to redesign all aspects of their policies and procedures to implement a guided pathways model. Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015) reported that while guided pathways was still a new initiative and long-range studies were needed, initial numbers showed promise for increased persistence, credits earned, and completion.

The challenge with guided pathways was the lack of any quantitative evidence that such a model would increase completion. Salaman (2017) argued that while community college leaders across the nation were largely advocates of the initiative, critics of guided pathways argued that they were a baseless method for an attempt to improve student completion. The implementation of guided pathways also required a complete restructuring of the curriculum that would prove to be a time-consuming and pain-staking process for most community colleges (Rose, 2016).

### **Progress Towards Completion**

Nearly a decade has passed since the completion agenda launched. Progress being made toward reaching the national goals set by Obama, the AACC, and others has been slow, and progress being made is at such a slow rate that meeting any of the national targets seems unlikely (Bailey, 2017; Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Fain, 2016; Field, 2016; McClenney, 2013; Rutschow, et. al., 2011; Stout, 2016). The national numbers demonstrated some progress, but have not increased at a trajectory that will meet the

targets. According to the 2015 AACC progress report on completion, “community colleges made great strides in increasing the raw numbers of credentials they were awarding, and the trajectory suggests that they may be able to meet the targets if the increase continues at the same rate.” But the probability of the increase continuing at the same rate has met with skepticism as enrollment at many community colleges dropped and funding has been cut (AACC, 2017; Bailey, 2016; Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Field, 2016; Stout, 2016). It will be challenging under those circumstances for community colleges to maintain a steady rate of increase toward completion.

Community colleges leaders and researchers arrived at consensus on at least two plausible explanations for the slow progress: First, interventions were offered at scale and only targeted a small population of students; and second, most interventions were offered early in the student experience (the first semester) and failed to have a lasting effect through to completion (Bailey, 2017; Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; McClenney, 2013; Stout, 2016). Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015) argued that research conducted on the original 26 schools who joined Achieving the Dream (ATD) in 2009 provided a good snapshot of completion reforms and their impact. In the ATD study conducted by Rutschow, et. al. (2011) the findings suggested that most interventions only targeted small populations of students or were designed to help students in the early portion of their enrollment at a community college. Very few interventions reached more than a quarter of the student population, and most interventions that were large scale tended to be “low-intensity” that engaged students for a very brief period of time (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015, p. 8). The study showed that the reforms to increase completion were

not changing outcomes in any substantial way. For any changes to have a wide-spread impact, more comprehensive and organizational change would be needed. And according to Stan Jones of Complete College America, progress toward completion will continue to be slow unless the entire community college sector engages in comprehensive reform to impact completion on a national level.

To say that the completion agenda was completely ineffective is a misnomer. Individual community colleges saw increases in completion rates. The Aspen Institute has recognized excellent community colleges since 2011. The Institute uses several metrics for determining excellence and completion is among the metrics. Since 2011 they have recognized 22 different community colleges. The completion rate of the 22 colleges surpasses the national average by over ten percentage points. One of the most impressive schools in this list is Valencia College in Florida who between 2007 and 2011 increased Associate of Applied Science degrees conferred by 84%, certificates by 46%, and Associate in Art and Associate in Science degrees by 66%. Lake Area Technical Institute in South Dakota boasted a 76% completion rate, and Kennedy-King College in Chicago doubled its completion rate in just five years. In addition to the Aspen Institute, ATD has recognized 14 colleges since 2009 who demonstrated “whole college” reform and showed increases in completion rates (Stout, 2016, p. 101). These 36 community colleges represent a small sample of the over 1,000 community colleges nation-wide, but share some common attributes. Among them is strong and committed leadership dedicated to comprehensive reform.

### **The Completion Agenda and the Role of Leadership**

Leadership was identified an essential component for the success of the completion agenda. Strong leadership will be needed because for most community colleges, the focus on completion was a significant addition to the mission. Leading an institution focused on increasing access and accommodating a wide variety of student needs and goals was very different than leading an institution focused on guiding students through to completion (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). “Coming to Our Senses” (College Board, 2008) argued that college presidents must “step up to the plate” and clearly identify student completion as a priority and establish a vision for the institution that focuses all efforts and resources toward that end (p. 43). “A Call to Action” (McPhail, 2011) implored leaders to move the entire institution toward a focus on completion and infuse completion into every area of the college. “Reclaiming the American Dream” (AACC, 2012) was most direct in its message to college leaders; the report called for community colleges to “redesign themselves for new times” (p. 9). Part of this redesign required community college leaders to make hard choices about who will be served, what priorities will be set, and what outcomes will be pursued. This new direction potentially required community colleges to say no to and turn away from traditional parts of their mission. “Reclaiming the American Dream” was clear in its message that committed, strategic, and courageous leaders were needed to achieve the desired changes.

Bailey (2017) argued that the small improvements that occurred in regards to completion can largely be attributed to a select group of enthusiastic administrators,

faculty, and staff who implemented a small pilot or intervention that minimally disrupted the normal practices of the institution. Larger, more comprehensive changes that impact a larger number of students will be more disruptive to the normal operations of the college and will require active engagement from a much larger segment of the administration, faculty, and staff. George Boggs (2013), former president of the AACC, recognized the need for and challenges of this type of leadership and reform. Boggs called on leaders to stop being protective of and driven by past practices and processes and respond to the completion agenda with innovation and creativity. But Karen Stout (2016), president of ATD, recognized that change was slow and difficult. Like others, she noted that most reforms were currently “at the margins or in pockets without the changes in culture and organizational design that produce scaled results” (p.99). Stout (2016) nicely articulated several reasons why change was difficult to manage in community colleges. She argued that by nature community colleges reflected the needs and aspirations of the community within which they resided. Community college leaders may experience push back by a change in focus or if shifting to focus on a singular mission of student completion if the local context had other priorities. Stout (2016) also argued that it is not often leaders alone who control the pace and nature of reform, but other stakeholders. Leaders need to drive reform while demonstrating patience as organizational structures, shared governance processes and unions experience change at their own pace.

A study by the Aspen Institute (2015) examined the characteristics of community colleges that were successful in implementing changes that resulted in increases in completion. The study found multiple factors contributed to large scale changes, and



among those factors was leadership that was committed and focused on the single goal of increasing student success. Leaders at successful community colleges clearly articulated a vision for completion and created a culture on campus that established student success as a shared responsibility. In a 2014 report by the AACC, “Empowering Community Colleges,” community college leaders were encouraged to commit to a campus culture focused on completion and design hiring and evaluation process around that focus.

### **Higher Education, Organizational Theory, and Decision-Making.**

Research on organizational theory and decision-making offers additional insight into the challenges associated with large scale reform in colleges and universities.

Johnson and Fauske (2005) suggested that many of the issues that education struggles with have already been addressed by organizations outside of education. By considering how those issues were addressed, education can benefit from the lessons and make decisions informed by practices from other organizations. The frameworks from organizational theory address how groups of people work together towards a common goal, and the dynamics of higher education are comparable and can be guided by the frameworks. Johnson and Fauske (2005) recognized the advantages of applying organizational theory to education, but they acknowledged that the unique context of any organization was the primary factor in determining how they operated and how decisions were made. To this end, organizational theory was limited in its ability to inform educational practices.

Manning (2012) captured the limits and addressed the complexities of applying organizational theory to higher education when she presented a variety of decision-

making processes and discussed the challenges and benefits of each approach within the context of higher education. Manning concluded that any single decision-making process was inadequate for explaining higher education because the interactions and dynamics of faculty, staff, students, and administrators made understanding education uniquely challenging. While organizations might be influenced by a dominant approach, when one model becomes an explanation for all situations, especially in higher education, the complexity of the work is overlooked.

Manning (2012) expanded on her argument when she characterized higher education as an organization filled with tensions that made flexibility and adaptability challenging. She described higher education as a “mature” industry. According to Manning (2012), organizational theorists posited that organizations progress through a life-cycle of birth, early development, institutionalization, and maturity. Mature organizations were slow to change because they became firm in their structures and processes. Manning (2012) suggested that it was important to understand and respect the maturity of higher education’s structure and processes, but to recognize that it can impede innovation and creativity. Manning (2012) concluded that higher education could benefit from considering new and innovative approaches in organizational theory to understand how a new perspective can help colleges and universities rejuvenate and revitalize.

The complexity that Manning (2012) and Johnson and Fauske (2005) captured in the research was amplified during the completion agenda. Community colleges were being asked to address completion, but the completion agenda literature was clear that other priorities needed to be maintained. Community colleges and their leaders received

mixed messages about the decisions they needed to make. They were being called to innovate and adapt by making difficult choices and to focus their mission; however, they were also being told to maintain key pieces of their current mission. The completion agenda required leaders to balance competing priorities and make trade-offs. According to George (2014) all decisions involve a trade-off with something being gained and other things being lost. This form of decision-making is commonly referred to as trade-off analysis and may provide a better way of understanding how community colleges needed to operate in the context of the completion agenda.

Another way to understand trade-off analysis is the concept of the iron triangle. Most often associated with political science, the iron triangle was a way to understand the relationship between special interest groups, congress, and bureaucratic agencies during the policy-making process. Each group represents one side of the triangle, and the three sides of the triangle operate to create policy in ways that are mutually beneficial to each group. Each side of the triangle informs the others in an interrelated fashion with give and take and compromise a necessary part of the process. Business has adopted the use of the iron triangle to better understand project management. The quality of a project is both shaped and limited by the factors of scope, budget and deadlines (the three sides of the triangle). In order to successfully bring a project to completion, these three sides of the triangle must be balanced, but compromises must be made. A project manager can make decisions about getting a project done for less cost, but the deadline or scope may need to change; or, a project can be done within a shorter timeframe, but that will affect cost and

scope. The project manager must understand that changes in one side of the triangle will necessitate changes in the others.

Education has not adopted the concept of the iron triangle in any meaningful way, but a report from the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and the Public Agenda (2008) prepared a document titled “The Iron Triangle: College Presidents Talk About Costs, Access, and Quality.” The authors of this report discovered commonalities in the challenges faced by higher education according to interviews with over 30 college presidents. Cost, access, and quality were presented as the three sides of the iron triangle in higher education. Daniel, Kanwar, & Uvalic-Trumbic (2009) identify the same three sides for their Iron Triangle in their discussion of increasing educational attainment on a global scale. Regardless of the discipline and the labels given to the three sides of the triangle, the basic concept holds true: the three sides of the triangle are inextricably “linked in an unbreakable reciprocal relationship, such that any change in one will inevitably impact others” (NCCPHE, 2008, p. 4). The decisions leaders in higher education were faced with during the completion agenda arguably presented access, affordability, and student supports as three sides of an iron triangle. Part of the challenge faced by leaders was making decisions that tried to maintain a balance, but more likely resulted in a trade-off.

Implementing comprehensive reform was clearly a challenge for community colleges and a significant obstacle to improving completion at a national level. Even the most successful interventions typically had minimal long-term or wide-spread impact, and community colleges that experienced dramatic reform are the exceptions. There is

little evidence to suggest that the community college sector responded with the dramatic redesign that the completion agenda encouraged; however, there have been two recent cases of colleges that were designed and implemented within the last ten years as a response to the completion agenda.

### **New Directions: Guttman Community College and Alpha College**

Guttman Community College (GCC--originally called New Community College) opened in 2012 as a direct and intentional response to the completion agenda. Under the City University of New York (CUNY) system, GCC was developed as an innovative educational model designed to improve educational outcomes for a diverse population of students, especially traditionally underserved populations (low-income, first-generation). The design of GCC was based on the following premise: use research that demonstrates proven practices for increasing student success and design a college using those practices (Bailey, 2017; Bailey, 2012; Weinbaum, Rodriguez, & Bauer-Maglin, 2014; Weinbaum, Rodriguez, & Bauer-Maglin, 2013). Most improvements in completion yielded minimal gains because they were limited in scope and scale. By designing a new college based on research, a unique opportunity presented itself. As Bailey (2012) noted, “the important thing about New Community College (GCC) was not any one thing they’re doing, but that they’re doing all of them together. All the research showed that if you do them alone, for a modest amount of time, they have a modest positive effect, but it doesn’t last. This will be a chance to see what happens if you do them together, consistently, over a longer period of time.”

GCC was designed over a four-year period by a large group of stakeholders. By the time the planning and design process was completed, the college arrived at model driven by key components, many similar to the design features of Alpha College. Table 3 provides a comparison of GCC and Alpha College based on some key features.

Table 3

*Guttman Community College and Alpha College Comparison Chart*

Guttman Community College (2017)	Alpha College (2015)
<u>Mission</u>	<u>Mission</u>
Stella and Charles Guttman College is an urban public institution that offers associate degree programs in an environment that nurtures student success. Based on extensive research, Guttman Community College integrates excellence in teaching, proactive and responsive student supports and external partnerships. Our primary objective is to increase the number of students, especially those not effectively served in higher education, who persist in their programs of study and attain a degree in a timely manner. We offer a clearly defined educational pathway including an integrated first-year curriculum that is inquiry-based and majors that prepare students for careers and baccalaureate study. Guttman programs are academically rigorous, multidisciplinary and experientially based.	Alpha College is a two-year college of [a large, urban university] that continues the [faith based] tradition of offering a rigorous liberal arts education to a diverse population, many of whom are the first in their family to pursue higher education.  Using an innovative model that ensures affordability while providing care for the whole person—intellectually, morally, and spiritually—Alpha prepares its graduates to continue on to a bachelor’s program or move into meaningful employment.
Public community college; part of a city-wide public system (CUNY)	Private 2-year college; part of a large private faith-based university.
<u>Limited enrollment</u>	<u>Limited enrollment</u>

289 inaugural class; not to exceed 5,000	159 inaugural class; not to exceed 400
Highly structured curriculum with few options for students and no developmental education courses	Highly structured curriculum with few options for students and no developmental education courses
<u>Offers limited associate degree options</u>	<u>Offers limited associate degree options</u>
A.A. in Business Administration	A.A. in Liberal Arts
A.A. in Human Services	A.A. in Business
A.A. in Liberal Arts and Sciences	A.A. in Social and Behavioral Sciences
A.A. in Urban Studies	
A.A.S. in Information Technology	
Multi-step admissions process <u>(limited enrollment)</u>	Multi-step admissions process <u>(limited enrollment)</u>
1. Apply to CUNY system 2. Required Group Information Session 3. Required Individual Meeting	1. Apply to Alpha College 2. Written essay 3. Letter of recommendation 4. Interview 5. Also recommends a 2.5 GPA, financial need, and a set of completed high school course.
Students must enroll full-time	Students must enroll full-time
Students attend classes in a cohort	Students attend classes in a cohort
<u>Tuition:</u>	<u>Tuition:</u>
\$4,800 for New York Residents (2016-2017)	\$12,500 (2017-2018) + \$530 fees

There are some key differences between GCC and Alpha College that are important to note. GCC is more than twice the size of Alpha College and may grow significantly larger. If both reach capacity, GCC could have 5,000 students as compared to Alpha

College's 400. The tuition at Alpha College is significantly higher than GCC. One difference may be that one is public (GCC) and the other private (Alpha College), but it is worth noting that Alpha College is more than double GCC in costs. Finally, GCC offers more career development and career exploration than Alpha College. While Alpha Colleges offers a nod to career development in the mission statement, it does not offer any Associate in Applied Science degrees and emphasizes its liberal arts and transfer focus in its mission.

What is perhaps more interesting for this research is to examine how the two are similar. While there are several similarities, I focus on those most directly related to access, affordability, and student supports. Both GCC and Alpha College have more extensive admissions requirements than most community colleges. By design, both colleges put processes in place to limit access. Reasons for the limited access may be varied. Both have limited space and may restrict enrollment out of necessity; however, GCC's relocation in 2020 to a larger space will allow it to expand its enrollment to its desired 5,000 (Bockmann, 2016). The reasons may be financial—funding new initiatives as state and federal expenditures for education are being cut poses tremendous challenges. The other reason may be driven by challenges posed by providing intrusive and structured supports to larger populations of students. We have seen that implementation of initiatives at scale has proven to be among the most significant obstacles for reaching increases in completion. If these colleges grow too large, too quickly—will they be able to sustain the level of support needed to students? For



whatever the reasons, it must be noted that the admissions process and requirements put in place by both colleges limit access.

Alpha College is more direct in its approach to affordability than GCC. Alpha College is designed for students with limited financial resources and pledges that most students will be able to complete with little or no debt. Alpha College admits students who expect to qualify for financial aid, and between those funds and foundation scholarships, most students will pay less than \$2,000 per year. However, Alpha College may further limit access to students who do not qualify for financial assistance if the costs cannot be kept low enough to supplement a student's contribution with scholarships. According to their website, GCC is committed to removing financial barriers as an obstacle for students, and over 70% of GCC students receive Pell Grants; however, GCC is subject to the processes and procedures of the CUNY system. While Alpha College operates with more freedom and has worked to establish a foundation to support students, CUNY is more constrained. GCC does offer scholarships for students, but it does not make any claims as Alpha College does about helping students complete with little or no debt.

Both colleges are dedicated to providing student supports to help students through to completion. GCC and Alpha are both designed with the intrusive and intensive supports promoted by the advocates of the completion agenda. Both include highly structured curriculum pathways with intrusive advising by faculty and support staff. Students accepted into both colleges are required to participate in a summer session that establishes the expectations for students and operates as a form of college success course.

The intensive advising allows the progress of students at both colleges to be carefully monitored and responsive interventions implemented as needed. At Alpha College the faculty serve as advisors and have designated advisory time to check in with the faculty/advisor. GCC follows a similar model. All students are assigned a Student Success Advocate (SSA) who they meet with weekly during an advising seminar to provide students with strategies for being a successful student. The few degree plan options, structured curriculum for each degree, the intensive advising, and required summer program all follow the recommendations of what seems to work for community colleges and GCC and Alpha College are two new models designed to infuse these supports into their operations.

Both GCC and Alpha experienced success in their early years. GCC's first cohort of students had a 48% graduation rate after three years (Bailey, 2016), and Alpha College's first cohort boasted a two-year graduation rate of over 50%.

### **Alpha College and Gaps in the Literature**

There may be several reasons why GCC and Alpha College have been successful during their first year. Discovering some of those reasons could provide insight into the work of other community colleges. That path of discovery may also reveal what compromises and trade-offs these new models needed to make along the way and how those may have impacted their success. For example, both colleges have an admissions process that limits access to students. Both provide limited degree choices and structured curricular pathways. Both implemented mandatory and highly intensive supports.

Efforts to increase completion—whether they have been effective or not—have been mostly focused on institutions implementing initiatives within current practices and models. We have seen from Bailey (2017), Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins (2015), Stout (2016) and others that many of these initiatives have not resulted in the comprehensive changes need to dramatically increase completion. One of the reasons posited for the lack of comprehensive reform are the challenges associated with change management. The review of GCC provided a quick example of an institution that responded to the completion agenda with a new model. Not having to change an institution's culture and having the benefit of designing a college from the ground up based on proven practices in supporting student success provides a unique opportunity to study what can result when multiple supports are all implemented at the same time at scale.

Alpha College provides the same opportunity. A case study of the new institution within the context of the completion agenda has not yet been completed. Examining a new institution designed specifically to support students through to completion provides an opportunity to understand how a college can not only be designed to support student completion, but to see how leadership in a college can balance competing priorities of access, affordability, and student supports.

## CHAPTER III

### METHOD

The purpose of this research was to understand Alpha College within the context of and as a response to the completion agenda, and how decisions made by the Administrative Leadership Team (ALT) during implementation addressed and balanced the completion agenda themes of access, affordability, and student supports to provide access to an affordable education to low-income, minority students. This research also wanted to determine if any features of Alpha College's model could be adopted or adapted to support and inform the completion work of other two-year colleges. To achieve these purposes, a focused and detailed examination of Alpha College and the ALT was necessary, and an instrumental single case study approach was used. This approach provided an in-depth understanding of Alpha College and the ALT and allowed for the research to be positioned within the broader context of the completion agenda.

#### **Case Study**

The instrumental case study approach was described by Stake (1995) as research in which the case is selected for its ability to contribute to a general understanding of a phenomenon. Stake (1980) juxtaposed the instrumental approach to an intrinsic approach which captures a case in its entirety and the interest of the research "begins and ends with

the case” (p. 404). Instrumental case studies still capture the nuances and complexities of a case, but extend the understanding of the case to offer insight into broader, contextual issues. Merriam (2009) added some clarity to this distinction when she differentiated between the two by focusing on the primacy of the case to the research. For intrinsic case study research, the case is of primary interest, and the research has minimal intention of generalizing or contextualizing the case. In instrumental case study research, the case is of secondary importance and the primary intention is to use a detailed understanding of the case to provide insight into other phenomenon outside the case. This research was interested in gaining and presenting a deep understanding of Alpha College; however, the research was also interested in offering insight into how Alpha College and the ALT operated within the context of the completion agenda. The instrumental case study approach was useful to achieve both purposes of the research.

Although the instrumental case study approach examined both the case and the broader context in which it was situated, Stake (1980) reminded the case study researcher that a great deal of attention must be paid to the case. Case study research dedicates time and effort to gaining a full understanding of the case in all its complexity. Merriam (2009) echoed Stake’s reminder when she argued that above all else, a case study must be able to clearly define a case for investigation. Sometimes referred to as a “unit of analysis” or “bounded system,” case study research focuses on in-depth and detailed description of a single bounded unit regardless of interest in a broader context (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1997; Yin, 1989). This research

addressed the single, bounded system of Alpha College and more specifically the processes and experiences of the ALT during the implementation of Alpha College.

### **Data Generation and Process**

To complete this case study research three types of data were collected and analyzed: observations and observation notes of the ALT meetings, interviews and transcripts from members of the ALT, and documents relevant to Alpha College.

#### **Observations**

Beginning in 2015, the administration from the parent university of Alpha College wanted to document the initiation, development, and implementation of Alpha College. As a graduate student and working community college administrator, I was invited to become a member of a research team. My primary role on the team was to observe weekly, hour long meetings of the ALT. As a part of that team, I visited the ALT meetings for a year and gathered observation data during that time.

The ALT represented the leadership of Alpha College. The purpose of the ALT meetings was to share updates among the administrators from the various areas of the College, offer input about pending decisions about policies, practices, and processes to support the students of Alpha College. The membership of the ALT and the issues discussed made the meetings valuable resources for data collection about how Alpha College was being implemented and the operations and decision making at Alpha College.

During my initial participation in the ALT observations, the focus of the research was on identifying common themes and issues that arose during the first several months

of implementation. Issues of how Alpha College would shape its identity in relation to the parent university, how the curriculum was being implemented, and how the mission and vision were being realized emerged as primary issues of the early observations.

During my time as a member of the research team, I became interested in how the ALT was struggling with some of the same issues and trying to answer many of the same questions that faced comprehensive community colleges across the country. I further developed this interest as my observations continued, and I became intrigued by a future study of Alpha College and began to focus on issues relevant to how the ALT was operating and making decisions that aligned with themes common to the completion agenda that was informing the work of community colleges across the nation.

Documentation of the ALT meetings began in July 2015 and continued through July 2016 during which time I observed most of the weekly ALT meetings. At these meetings, I was purely an observer. To use Gold's typology (1958), I was an observer as participant in which my participation in the group was secondary to my role of information gatherer. I understood this to be my role, and it was evident that members of the ALT understood my primary purpose as information gatherer. I had access to members of the ALT and a wide range of information; however, the level of information revealed to me during the observations was controlled by the ALT. Some information was gladly shared with me, some cautiously, and some information was intentionally not shared with me. Items such as meeting agendas, itineraries and curriculum for the Summer Preparation Program, admissions and enrollment data, and event information was openly shared. The ALT was more cautious in sharing student success data (GPA,

persistence); however, this data was shared with me during some of the ALT meetings, but not during others. There was no apparent pattern in choosing when and why to share this information with me. Not surprisingly, almost all information that included private details about a student's academic or personal life were either kept from me, redacted identifiers, or the ALT spoke vaguely about the students without using names.

As an observer participant, I never interacted with members of the ALT during the meetings nor did I interrupt to ask questions, request information, or seek clarification. I did interact in friendly conversation with members of the ALT before and after the meetings, and on a few occasions (because the members of the ALT were aware of my role as a community college administrator), I was asked for my input on issues being discussed. These conversations always occurred after the meetings, never during. It should also be noted that during several ALT meetings, I was joined by a graduate student colleague who also served on the research team. Observation notes were collected by both of us, and when completing our final write ups we engaged in peer checking to validate the accuracy and trustworthiness of our observations.

During the observations I focused on capturing the conversations among the ALT members, the manner in which they interacted with each other, how the decision-making process occurred, what features of Alpha College seemed most important to the ALT during implementation, and what specific decisions were made to help students succeed and fulfill their mission of providing access to an affordable education for low-income, minority students. During the first few months of observations, I wrote my notes longhand and typed them shortly after the meeting. After the first few months, I used a



laptop to capture my notes and refined them into a final, clean version shortly after the meeting. As I collected the observation data, I engaged in initial and informal coding of the data to identify common themes and tentative categories. The process of coding at this early stage included identifying recurring themes from the weekly meetings. As the themes emerged, I included them in verbal reports to the research team. Some themes were prevalent enough that the findings from the observations became the subject of research reports for the team that were shared with Alpha College.

## **Interviews**

Interviews were conducted with 6 members of the ALT in 2019. After initial analysis of the observation data and documents, the interviews were conducted to serve two purposes. First, they allowed me to ask specific questions about Alpha College to verify and clarify my observation notes and fill in any gaps. Second, the interviews allowed me to ask questions about specific features of Alpha College's design, how the design was implemented and what design features were reinforced or altered during implementation. The interviews offered recollections and insights from members of the ALT about the design and implementation of Alpha College. The features of Alpha College that were asked about during the interviews were key issues that emerged during the first year of implementation based on discussions observed during ALT meetings.

**Interview protocol.** Using email, I contacted eight of the nine members of the ALT who served between 2015 and 2017. Six agreed to be interviewed. The two individuals who were contacted but not interviewed did not respond to my request. The

member of the ALT not contacted, the Director of Finance, was primarily an employee of the parent university and attended less than half of the ALT meetings I observed.

The six members of the ALT who were interviewed represented key functions of the Alpha College and their combined perspectives provided insight into the various features of Alpha College's design and the implementation process. The Dean of Alpha College was a key interview as he was the facilitator of the ALT meetings and chief administrator of Alpha College. The Associate Dean for Academic Affairs was the chief academic administrator and was responsible for oversight of the faculty advisors, instruction, and curriculum. The Associate Dean for Student Success was responsible for oversight of the various supports that were offered to students. The Associate Director of Admission was responsible for the operations of the admissions and recruiting process, and he worked with the Assistant Director of Admissions who was also interviewed. Together they provided insights into the recruiting and admissions process (including the interviews) that was valuable to understanding the design and implementation of Alpha College. The College Transition Advisor was interviewed. Her responsibility included assisting students with all facets of transfer from Alpha College to a four-year college or university.

After the participants agreed to an interview, a mutually agreed upon time and place to conduct the interview was established. Prior to the interview, participants were emailed the consent form and the set of questions that guided the interview. The interviews were semi-structured. I began with a prepared set of questions for each interview, but asked follow up questions based on the responses and direction of the

interview. All interviews were conducted face-to-face and participants signed the consent form before the interview began. The interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. Five of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and I also took handwritten notes. Only handwritten notes were taken during the interview with the College Transition Advisor. Each person who was interviewed was sent pages of the research where they were quoted for their review of accuracy and trustworthiness.

## **Documents**

Documents collected and analyzed for this research included media coverage of Alpha College's opening, documents distributed at ALT meetings, and other documents collected during Alpha College's implementation. The media coverage of Alpha College constituted the largest collection of documents. The coverage was primarily focused on the opening of Alpha College and included interviews with individuals involved in the design and implementation of Alpha College. The coverage added perspectives from reporters and other individuals external to Alpha College.

The documents distributed at ALT meetings included data about student academic progress, admission updates, and demographic information. This information was used in this research only as it informed the discussions and decisions of the ALT.

Other documents gathered included information from Alpha College's website, the mission statement, and programs, agendas, and fliers from various Alpha College events.

## Analysis

Qualitative research studies involve a continuous interplay between data collection and data analysis (Merriam, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). My data collection spanned a period from 2015-2019. The observations were conducted from 2015-2016 and the interviews took place in 2019. The continuous interplay between data collection and data analysis for this research resulted in an approach that is described below.

1. Using literature from the completion agenda, I used *a priori* coding to identify common themes to use for the data analysis: access, affordability, and student supports.
2. Using media and other documents, I presented the design of Alpha College which represented the state of Alpha College prior to opening and prior to the ALT interacting with Alpha College.
  - a. I identified recurring themes in the media and documents. The recurring themes led to a primary design principle that aligned with the broad completion agenda themes.
  - b. The media and documents also revealed key features of Alpha College's design that were mapped to the three broad themes and design principles.

These became design features of Alpha College.

Steps 1 and 2 created a portrait of Alpha College's design that contextualized it within the context of the completion agenda and captured the "pre-opening" and "pre-ALT" state of Alpha College.

3. Using data collected during observations of ALT meetings during the first year of implementation (July 2015-July 2016) I identified key issues—both challenges and opportunities—discussed by the ALT as they implemented the Alpha College design. The key issues were identified by both the frequency at which they were discussed during the first year, and by the implications the issues had for the design of Alpha College. These key issues were mapped to and presented within the design features of Alpha College. They were mapped to the design feature based on the ALT discussing the issue as related to access, affordability, or student supports. In some instances, the ALT understood issues as relating to more than one design feature; however, I looked for any consistent patterns as to how the ALT best understood the feature to work as part of Alpha College.
4. After the key implementation issues from year one were identified, I conducted interviews with six members of the ALT who served between 2015 and 2017 to identify significant changes and developments that occurred after the first year to address the key implementation issues. As this data was collected and analyzed, notes were made to align the changes and developments to access, affordability, and student supports. In some instances this was possible; however, in other instances the changes and developments to reinforce or alter the design of Alpha College often overlapped and demonstrated that access, affordability, and student supports intersected. These intersections revealed how the ALT prioritized some features over others.

5. The intersections are examined in the discussion to consider what features of Alpha College were prioritized within their design and implementation within the broader context of the completion agenda.

Step five reengages the concept of the Iron Triangle from the literature review. While I did not fully adopt the Iron Triangle for my study, it did help frame Alpha College and the decision making of the ALT around the issues of access, affordability, and student supports. The ALT of Alpha College made decisions about the themes of access, affordability, and student supports to meet its goals and mission during implementation. These three themes will be viewed as three sides of a triangle in a reciprocal relationship, and decisions of the ALT will be examined for how they tried to address and balance all three.

### **Limitations**

While Stake (1980) cautioned the case study researcher against being preoccupied or overly concerned with generalizability, he did provide an argument for generalization. Stake (1995) argued that generalization in case study research should be left up to the reader. By using the completion agenda as a broader context for the research, the readers are provided with a framework for engaging with the research. Any conclusions for application to their own context and work will be left to the reader. This echoed the position of Pearson, et. al. (2015) who suggested that whether a case is typical or atypical, it was not unusual for the reader to find general understandings from a case study.

Even with these arguments for broad application of case study research, generalizability remained a limitation. The unique size and design of Alpha College and how dramatically it differs from comprehensive community colleges makes the model difficult to relate to existing models, so the ability to generalize became an even more prominent limitation for this research. Additionally, a single case study further limits the generalizability than if the research were approached as a multi-state case study.

The research was limited in its ability to gain a complete understanding of the bounded system of Alpha College. If this research was an intrinsic case study and the sole interest was to gain a comprehensive understanding of Alpha College, additional perspectives would be added to the limited perspective of the ALT in this study. How students, families, faculty, members of the parent university, and board members understand and experience Alpha College would add insights not provided with the instrumental case study approach of this research.

This research was also limited by the features that are investigated as part of the case study. Features of Alpha College were included in this research if analysis did not map them to one of the broad categories. For example, student celebrations and the development of co-curricular activities were frequent conversations during implementation. While this topic received attention by the ALT, it did not emerge as a topic that aligned with the completion agenda themes or received enough attention to be addressed in this study. This study was somewhat deductive in its approach and the use of the completion agenda themes of access, affordability, and student supports. A more inductive approach could reveal additional themes and insights.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

This chapter reports findings from data gathered from observations of the Alpha College Administrative Leadership Team (ALT) during the time period of July 2015-July 2016, from 6 interviews with ALT members conducted in 2019, from documents provided at the ALT meetings, public documents related to Alpha College, and media covering the opening of Alpha College. The data was manually coded and analyzed to answer the research questions posed by this study:

1. What decisions made by the ALT during implementation of Alpha College addressed completion agenda themes of access, affordability, and student supports to provide low to no debt education to low-income minority students?
  - a. How did the ALT's decision-making process function?
  - b. What issues emerged of primary concern to the ALT to increase completion?
  - c. What decisions made by the ALT during implementation deviated from the initial design of Alpha College in order to directly address completion?  
  
Do any decisions to deviate demonstrate a prioritization of completion over other competing goals?



- d. How did the ALT make decisions to create a culture focused on completion?

The findings address the purpose of this study: to understand Alpha College within the context of and as a response to the completion agenda themes of access, affordability, and student supports. Documenting discussions and decisions of the ALT about key features of the college's design to address access, affordability, and student supports to increase completion among low-income and minority students historically underserved by higher education was the primary focus.

The findings are reported in the following manner: First, based on observations and interviews, how the ALT's decision-making process functioned is presented. Second, using media coverage and other documents, the design of Alpha College's model is established with design principles and features aligned with the completion agenda themes of access, affordability, and student supports. Third, based on a year of observation data from ALT meetings, key implementation discussions are presented for each of the design principles and features. The implementation discussions are not comprehensive, but represent topics that were frequently discussed and deliberated during the implementation of Alpha College. Fourth, actions and decisions related to implementation discussions are presented. Using interviews conducted in 2019 with members of the ALT, the actions and decisions to address challenges and opportunities

that emerged during implementation are detailed. Some of the actions and decisions led to changes in the design while others reinforced the design.

### Participants

The primary sources of data were observations and interviews gathered from members of the Administrative Leadership Team (ALT) at Alpha College who served between 2015 and 2017. The original membership of the ALT consisted of seven people, and two additional members joined in 2016. The membership of the ALT included individuals responsible for all areas of the college: academics, student affairs, admissions, advancement, college placement, and finances. Table 4 identifies the members of the ALT, when they joined, the primary areas of oversight, demographic information, and which members were interviewed.

Table 4

#### *Members of the Administrative Leadership Team (2015-2017)*

Title	Year on ALT	Demographic Information	Primary Area of Responsibility
*Dean of Alpha College	2015	Caucasian male	Provided leadership and supervision for all areas of Alpha College.
*Associate Dean of Academic Affairs	2015	Caucasian female	Provided leadership for curriculum, academic affairs, and faculty advisors.
Associate Dean of Student Success	2015	African-American female	Coordinated academic and non-academic support services.

*Assistant Dean of Student Success	2016	Caucasian male	Provided support for the Associate Dean for Student Success.
*+Associate Director of Admissions	2015	African-American male	Coordinated the recruitment, interview process, and enrollment.
*Assistant Director of Admissions	2015	Latina	Responsible for recruiting efforts at high schools.
Director of Development	2015	Caucasian female	Developed donor base and grant opportunities.
*College Placement Director	2016	Caucasian female	Provided support for transfer to four year schools.
+Director of Finance	2015	African-American male	Represented the parent university responsible for budget planning with Alpha College Dean.

*Note:* Members marked with an \* were interviewed in 2019, and those marked with a + were employees of the parent university who worked with Alpha College during implementation.

Each member of the ALT had prior work experience in an educational setting in a position relevant to their work at Alpha College; however, none of the ALT members had any previous experience working at a two-year college. The experience was either in K-12 or a four-year college or university. The work experience of the ALT ranged from 30 years to just under 10 years. Two members of the ALT held doctorate degrees, six had master's degrees, and one had a bachelor's degree.

The ALT members will be referred to by job title, and some references will only refer to “a member of the ALT.” The primary interest of this study was a deep understanding of Alpha College’s design and implementation through the collective functioning of the ALT. How the ALT operated as a group was more important than the individual personalities, so pseudonyms were not assigned and time was not dedicated to developing distinct dispositions or perspectives.

### **The ALT and Decision-Making**

During the first year of implementation, the ALT met weekly for one hour scheduled meetings that took place during the afternoon in a large conference room. The meetings usually started promptly and progressed through the agenda item by item typically ending within an hour. The meetings were run by the Dean who also set the agenda. During an interview the Dean said that while he asks everyone for input into the agenda, he makes the final decisions about items that are added. Sometimes the items are “too micro” to warrant attention from the ALT, or time is a factor and he needs to limit the length of the agenda. Agendas included recurring items and updates on enrollment and student issues, but most often the agendas focused on the most pressing issues facing Alpha College and the ALT at the time. ALT meetings were attended by the same core group of leaders, but guests were invited to provide updates and share information as needed.

The nature of the meetings was observed to be professional and collegial. Whether providing updates or discussing important issues, the ALT was thoughtful during their discussions and deliberations considering multiple perspectives, opinions,

and solutions. The ALT often celebrated successes of students and assumed shared responsibility for challenges faced by students. Each member of the ALT, regardless of their primary role at the college, equally discussed and shared strategies for assisting struggling students with academic and personal challenges.

The Dean ran the meetings without exception during the first year. On occasion various members of the ALT were absent from meetings, but an ALT meeting was never conducted in the Dean's absence. The Associate Dean of Academic Affairs shared during an interview that this practice has changed as the Dean's travel schedule intensified. Now, in his absence, she will occasionally facilitate the meetings. During the meetings, the Dean sat at the head of a conference table for each meeting and was the primary speaker; however, his command of the agenda and conference room belied the collaborative and cooperative nature of the meetings. During observations, each member of the ALT spoke freely and the Dean often asked for input during decisions and deliberations. He clearly established himself and held himself accountable as the primary decision-maker, but the overall decision-making process of the ALT can be characterized as collaborative and deliberative.

### **Collaborative Decision-Making**

The ALT did not follow a clearly defined or carefully prescribed decision-making process, but after a year of observing ALT meetings and conducting interviews with six members of the ALT, a few practices and approaches emerged to characterize how the decision-making process of the ALT functioned. During an interview the Dean described the purpose of the ALT as an opportunity for colleagues to hear from each other so the

different voices of the ALT can complement each other. This, he said, was a good way to identify and address student needs. He said, “for example, if Academic Affairs expresses a concern about a student and funding problem, the advancement officer is present, hears the concern, and can help.” He shared another example with the importance of the Director of Finance present during enrollment updates so budgeting can align with enrollment. The practice of sharing with each other “has made for more communication, and a deeper, thicker, richer understanding of what we’re all doing here.”

When making decisions the ALT would identify a concern or opportunity, gather information and input, discuss options to address the concern or opportunity, and then select an option. The Associate Dean of Academic Affairs described the decision-making of the ALT as “collaborative.” She said, “problems get identified and we brainstorm.” This collaborative process was observed often during the first year of ALT meetings. When students were not attending the Wednesday advisory sessions, the ALT deliberated collectively to generate a list of approaches to address the concern; when state budget challenges required Alpha College to make budget cuts, the ALT collaborated on ways to find efficiencies to curb expenditures; when “Students of Concern” became a recurring agenda item at ALT meetings, all members of the ALT contributed to strategies and solutions for assisting students in need; and when the Dean was prepared to hire a new support staff member, he requested input from the ALT for the job description and duties. Individual offices and departments were often delegated to make final decisions on which options were implemented, but the work of the ALT was highly collaborative. This

established a culture in which each member of Alpha College shared responsibility for supporting students and implementing the design.

Concerns and opportunities were identified by the ALT in a variety of ways during implementation. During observations, the ALT made frequent use of data to both identify and address issues. When asked about how data was used to inform decisions, the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs replied “constantly.” Early concerns about academic performance and access to Alpha College were a result of student data, and the use of data was a consistent theme of decision-making by the ALT. The Dean shared that data revealing low retention rates among African-American male students lead to an initiative supporting those students, and reviews of enrollment data led to strategies to increase enrollment among designated student populations.

Faculty advisors were important sources of information. The Associate Dean of Academic Affairs indicated that input from faculty advisors provided information that served as the impetus for change. Significant changes to the curriculum were brought about as a result of the faculty advisors’ experiences in the classroom. When students struggled to afford textbooks, the issue was brought to the ALT through the faculty advisors. During an interview, the Associate Director of Admissions suggested that input from faculty advisors played an important role, especially in the first year, of shaping Alpha College.

Students often identified concerns and had needs that were brought to the ALT. The Dean and the ALT were open to student input and were responsive to student needs. Expansion of the Alpha College curriculum and many of the student supports that were

offered developed as a result of student input. Student need and the student voice was a valued source of input, but during a March 2016 ALT meeting the Dean did clarify that students would not be a formal part of the decision-making process at Alpha College.

Many discussions and decisions were mission-driven. The ALT often invoked their mission as they were deliberating over an issue during implementation. Alpha College was designed to serve a carefully defined population of students in a very specific way, and as the ALT considered altering or reinforcing the design aligning with the mission was a key factor informing their process. Refinements to the admission process and the increased role of the faculty advisor to student relationship were both examples of the ALT making decisions to better implement and align with the mission.

### **Design**

In June 2014 the Board of Trustees of Alpha College's parent university approved moving forward with Alpha College, and in January 2015 Alpha College was granted accreditation. After accreditation, media stories about Alpha College began to appear in local and national news outlets. The media coverage, which often included interviews with individuals involved in the design of Alpha College and newly hired employees, broadly characterized Alpha College as an innovative model of higher education and a desperately needed resource to address the problem of low college attendance and completion rates among low-income minority students in the large urban area where Alpha College was located.<sup>6</sup> The media coverage portrayed Alpha College in a manner

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<sup>6</sup>To maintain the anonymity of Alpha College, the media coverage will be referred to in general terms, but all resources are documented in the possession of the researcher.



that aligned with the completion agenda themes of access, affordability, and student supports. For each of these completion agenda themes, design principles and features emerged from the media stories and other foundational documents that revealed how Alpha College manifested the themes of access, affordability, and student supports.

### **Design Principles and Features of Alpha College**

Analysis of media stories and documents relevant to the opening of Alpha College revealed a single design principle that could be attached to each of the themes of access, affordability and student supports that broadly described and defined access, affordability and student supports at the design phase. For each of the design principles, design features emerged that more specifically described how Alpha College was designed to address access, affordability, and student supports. Table 5 provides a visual display of the completion agenda themes, the design principles, and design features which were identified and discussed in the next section.

Table 5

#### *Design Principles and Features of Alpha College*

Completion Agenda Theme	Access	Affordability	Student Supports
Design Principle	Competitive and Limited	Little to No Debt	Holistic Supports
Design Features	Academic Performance	Work Program	Faculty Advisors
	Low Income	Scholarship Support	Structured Curriculum
	Grit	Student Aid	Academic Supports
	Underrepresented	Parent University	Personal Well- Being

**Access: Competitive and limited.** By design, Alpha College did not operate as an open door institution like most two-year colleges. To gain access students needed to meet specific criteria and participate in a competitive admissions process that included an application, completion of the Free Application for Student Aid (FAFSA), letters of reference, an essay, and an interview to demonstrate whether or not they were the “right fit.” The Dean of Alpha College discussed the importance of recruiting students who fit the Alpha College population profile which he described as “recent high school grads, traditional undergrad aged students, who qualify for federal and state aid, and who have the capacity to be successful in a rigorous academic environment if provided with appropriate support, and they’re the first in their family to attend college or university and also live within commuting distance to the college.” Each piece of the admissions process was intentional about providing access to the well-defined target student population articulated by the Dean. The specific design features related to access clarify how Alpha College was designed to provide access to the target population.

***Academic performance.*** Early media stories and documents filed with the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities (NAICU) as part of the national commitment to completion, indicated that Alpha College was designed to serve students who “scored between 17 and 22 on their ACT and who earned about a 2.5 GPA.” The rationale provided for the academic performance criteria can be understood as two-fold. First, in media stories prior to opening, Alpha College was promoted as providing a rigorous Liberal Arts transfer curriculum leading to an Associate’s Degree that would be completed within two years. For the two-year completion target to be met,

students were required to enroll full-time and needed to be prepared for the demands of full-time college-level coursework. Alpha College's design did not include remedial or developmental coursework, so college readiness was an important feature for success. Second, Alpha College was designed to provide access to students who often got left behind in higher education. In a February 2015 story in a national online magazine, the Dean of Alpha College stated that sectors of higher education have become elite and too often leave "great and college-deserving students behind." Students who meet the academic standard guidelines of Alpha College often demonstrate the potential to succeed, but, as NAICU documents indicated, those students are typically not strong enough academically to receive other grants and awards to support their education. Alpha College wanted students who were strong academically, but who might not receive the same level of scholarship funding as other students.

***Low-income.*** One of the most consistent themes about the design of Alpha College was serving low-income students. In a June 2015 article, a representative from a foundation supporting Alpha College stated that "the design was promising and innovative because it provided access to students without the financial resources to begin a traditional four-year program." According to the president of the parent university in a January 2015 article, Alpha College would provide access to "lots of different people, particularly people who are marginalized economically." To access Alpha College students needed to demonstrate financial need by completing the FAFSA and qualifying for state and federal student aid. Upon design, financial need was as much of a criterion for access as academic performance.

***Underrepresented populations.*** In addition to low-income students, Alpha College was designed to provide access to other populations underrepresented in higher education. According to the Dean of Alpha College in a May 2015 article, “first generation students, minority students, and undocumented students” will make up a large portion of Alpha College’s student body. The NAICU document supported the Dean’s statement by indicating that Alpha College will target students who are part of “underrepresented minority groups, especially African-American and Hispanics.” The desire to serve these underrepresented student populations cannot be separated entirely from the desire to serve low-income students. Media coverage of Alpha College’s opening made the connection portraying Alpha College as a needed resource in a city where the community college graduation rates among low-income and underrepresented students are “abysmally low.” While they are often conflated, low income students and underrepresented populations are treated separately in this research because during implementation the discussions about access to low-income and underrepresented groups were different.

***Grit.*** Alpha College was interested in providing access to students who demonstrated grit. How grit was defined upon design was not entirely clear, but the interview process was used to assess this quality. The Dean said of the interviews in a May 2015 article, “the interviews will not be long-winded affairs. Rather we want to identify students who have grit, perseverance, and resiliency.” The Dean referred to these characteristics as “the special sauce” that would help students succeed. While not fully

defined, the Dean suggested that students would be asked about times they demonstrated the ability to overcome obstacles to persist.

The design of Alpha College included competitive and limited access; however, multiple features were part of the design to deliberately provide access to a target student population. The combination of factors identified students as the “right fit” for Alpha College and who would be the students best served by the model and most likely to succeed.

**Affordability: Little to no debt.** Alpha College was designed for students to complete with “little to no debt.” A June 2015 article spoke of Alpha College’s affordability in the following way: “Financially, the goal is that students will pay a fraction of the usual cost out of pocket—if anything at all—with the aim of graduating students in two years with little to no debt.” To live up to the promise of little to no debt, Alpha College included features in its design that combined to create a financial model to support an affordable education.

**Student aid.** According to a January 2015 article, the Dean of Alpha College said that an important part of the College’s design was that most students would qualify for state and federal aid which was expected to cover the majority of costs associated with attending Alpha College. The revenue that would come from tuition would be covered by state and federal dollars. The dependence on financial aid intersected with providing access to low-income students. If Alpha College’s financial model was going to remain sustainable, admitting students who received large amounts of financial aid was critical to

the ongoing affordability of Alpha College. Alpha College's financial model also rests on the commuter experience so students do not face the added costs of room and board.

***Donors and foundation support.*** Alpha College's financial model was designed to rely on donors and strong foundation support to assist students with paying for college and to help provide Alpha College with resources. In June 2015, an article announced a one-million-dollar donation from a well-known foundation to support scholarships and other operating costs at Alpha College. Soliciting funds from private foundations and donors was an integral piece of Alpha College's financial model. Most students received a small scholarship that helped cover costs not addressed by financial aid and that fell beyond the financial means of the student. Donors and foundation support also provided many of the supports offered as part of Alpha College's design. A meal program, which included breakfast and lunch for all students, and distribution of lap tops to all students were both supported by donations. The funding of these programs through donated funds allowed Alpha College to offer these supports without passing the cost onto the students.

***Work program.*** The design of Alpha College included a work program that encouraged students to work part-time and contribute to the overall cost of their education. A May 2015 article reported that Alpha College employed a job placement specialist who would assist students with finding part-time jobs. The money students earned in these jobs would be used at their discretion, but could be put towards out-of-pocket costs of attending Alpha College or could help support the personal needs of the student or family. In the May 2015 article, the Dean stated that Alpha College was

designed with the expectation that students would work approximately 20-25 hours per week and contribute about \$1,700-\$1,800 towards their education.

***Parent university.*** The financial model of Alpha College was designed to have a relationship with its parent university. Though the relationship was not clearly defined at the design stage, there were benefits gained from being attached to a large, well-known university. In a May 2015 article, the Dean of Alpha College stated that by “deploying the resources of the university,” the financial model of Alpha College becomes viable. As designed, the parent university covered a portion of overhead costs, provided a space for Alpha College, and contributed resources needed during implementation. While support from the parent university was beneficial at the design phase, how the relationship would play out during implementation was uncertain.

Alpha College was designed to provide students with a rigorous education with little to no debt. The financial model of Alpha College was specifically designed to offer an affordable education to the target population. Upon implementation Alpha College experienced success in maintaining the affordability of its model; however, some challenges were posed during implementation that the ALT needed to address.

**Student supports: Holistic supports.** Alpha College was designed to provide student supports that addressed a broad range of needs, including life circumstances that often impeded student completion. In a January 2015 article, the president of the parent university pointed out that students often dropped out of college because life circumstances got in the way, and Alpha College was designed to address those obstacles. All students at Alpha College were provided with a meal plan, a laptop, and

had access to a social worker. Alpha College also offered academic supports such as tutoring, a summer preparation program, and intrusive advising. The design principle of holistic supports was complemented by specific design features that provided care for the whole student.

***Faculty advisors.*** The faculty role at Alpha College was designed for faculty to play a dual role of faculty member and advisor. The Dean of Alpha College described faculty at Alpha College as outstanding in their academic disciplines with a desire to work with Alpha College's student demographic mentoring them and helping them "develop confidence . . . that they belong in college." The design of Alpha College assigned students to a faculty advisor who they were required to meet with on a regular basis. Alpha College's design included a small class size which maximized the contact between students and faculty advisors with an approximate ratio of 1 faculty advisor to 20 students.

***Structured curriculum.*** The Alpha College curriculum was designed to be highly structured. All students pursued one of three highly prescribed Associate of Arts curriculums: Liberal Arts, Business, and Social and Behavioral Sciences. The structured curriculum left students with little guess work on what courses to take and minimized the chances that students got off track of completing within two years. The structured curriculum provided Alpha College students with year-long coursework that kept them engaged. The Alpha College curriculum was designed to be offered in 8-week sessions in a year round format with students taking two courses each session. The 8-week sessions allowed students to focus on fewer classes at a time and by offering courses all year



(including June and July) students were still able to finish in two years. The Dean of Alpha College stated in a May 2015 article, “We believe that if we didn’t offer classes in June and July, the risk would increase for the students [to not persist and complete] because life would get in the way.” The structured curriculum also supported the transfer mission of Alpha College. In a January 2015 article on the opening of Alpha College, the president of the parent university said that the curriculum at Alpha College will prepare students to transfer to four-year institutions. Other media coverage on Alpha College reinforced that the structured and limited “Liberal Arts” focused curriculum was designed specifically to facilitate transfer to four-year institutions. The courses offered at Alpha College did not include developmental or remedial course work and all courses were designed to align with transfer standards in the state, so all courses counted towards graduation and transfer.

***Academic supports.*** Alpha College was intentional in its design about putting resources in place to help students succeed academically. Alpha College provided students with enhanced academic supports that included tutoring, a required summer preparation program, and protected time set aside for homework and advising. In a May 2015 article, the Dean said that one of the features that makes Alpha College different is that there will be time to “complete homework in school” during set aside time and students will be required to “meet with advisors” and attend the summer program.

***Personal well-being.*** The president of the parent university said in a January 2015 article, “It’s the lives of those students you have to worry about. That’s why they drop out.” Alpha College was intentional about providing support for students for non-

academic challenges. A June 2016 article referenced a social worker who would be available to students to “address home life issues that can be a hindrance to staying in school.” The NAICU document indicated that Alpha College would provide “a student support system that is more holistic and better resourced than traditional models.”

Alpha College was designed to provide students with holistic supports. Students struggled to succeed for a variety of reasons and Alpha College wanted to create a culture and an environment in which each of these struggles could be addressed. During implementation, the ALT remained dedicated to providing many of these holistic supports, but discussions among the ALT revealed that providing some of the supports became challenging.

### **Implementation**

Alpha College was conceived by the president of the parent university and was designed by faculty and staff of the parent university. Beginning in July 2015, the ALT was responsible for implementation of the design—a design to which they made virtually no contributions. The following section uses observation data from ALT meetings during the first year of implementation to identify and document key implementation discussions. This section does not evaluate the design of Alpha College, but reflects representative discussions of the ALT, related to access, affordability, and student supports, as they implemented the design and what challenges they faced and opportunities they identified.

### **Access: Competitive and Limited**

When Alpha College began to recruit its second cohort of students to begin in fall 2016, discussions took place during ALT meetings about how to ensure that access was provided to students who fit the target student population. These discussions most often occurred because there were either questions about whether or not the first cohort of students were the “right fit” or out of a desire to maintain or increase the number of students who demonstrated they were the “right fit.” It is important to note that the second cohort of students would be the first class the ALT would have the primary responsibility for recruiting, interviewing, and admitting. Most members of the ALT were not a part of Alpha College when the first class was recruited.

**Academic performance.** To monitor academic performance, the ALT consistently reviewed data of student grades. During the first session at Alpha College many students performed well academically and were celebrated during ALT meetings. Students who excelled earned recognition on the Dean’s list, were invited to special events and were often asked to represent Alpha College at recruiting and media events. During a review of mid-term grades from the first 8-week session at a September 2015 ALT meeting, the ALT noticed that many other students struggled academically. Alpha College had set a target GPA for the first session of 2.85, and at mid-term of the first session the actual GPA of Alpha College students was 2.20. Out of the 159 students in the first cohort, 106 were below the target GPA. The ALT responded by sending out mid-term alerts (MTAs) to all students who received a ‘C’ or below in any class, and students were required to meet with the faculty advisor of the class who would work with the

student to chart a pathway to improve the grade. Final grades for the first session were shared by the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs during an October ALT meeting. The Associate Dean reported that the overall GPA had improved from 2.20 to 2.55; 76 students met the goal of having a 2.85 GPA; and 39 of 159 students earned a spot on the Dean's list with a 3.5 GPA or above. While the ALT saw an improvement, they expressed continued concerns about academic performance and how it might be addressed during the admission and application process to better admit students who better fit with Alpha College's academic preparedness expectations.

Student grades revealed that there was a pronounced difference in the academic performance among students from a particular network of schools. Students who were admitted from these high schools struggled more as a group than other students. Of these students, one member of the ALT commented, "A lot of grades [from high school] aren't matching the students' skill level. They're inflated." The ALT noted that over 50% of the unique MTAs were sent to students from this network of schools. After the review of first session final grades, the Dean suggested that, "Alpha College may need to be more careful about who is admitted, especially from these schools, and be more selective to have a higher caliber of student." During this meeting the Dean suggested that the interview and admission process be reviewed and refined, but he made it clear that he did not want to focus exclusively on the students from this particular network of schools, but that the review be comprehensive to ensure that students who are provided access are the "right fit."

**Low-income.** Concerns of providing access to low-income students did not result in the same level of conversation at ALT meetings as some of the other access features; however, the Dean expressed a desire to better ensure that low-income students continued to have priority access to Alpha College. During a March 2016 ALT meeting, the Dean acknowledged that the 88% of students in the first cohort were eligible for state and federal aid. He instructed the ALT that the number “needed to be closer to 98%” for the second cohort. The 98% target suggested that Alpha College was interested in almost exclusively serving low-income students. The Dean first addressed the issue during a January 2016 ALT meeting when he reported that he was asked if students not eligible for financial aid would be admitted to Alpha College. The Dean shared with the ALT that he quickly responded, “no” maintaining the paramount mission and design of serving low-income students. Maintaining access to low-income students emerged as a priority for the ALT.

Discussions among the ALT and low-income access were most prominently focused around Expected Family Contribution (EFC). While state and federal aid eligibility were strong indicators of low-income status, EFC provided concrete numbers to determine level of need. In March 2016, the Dean suggested to the ALT that any student with a high EFC be waitlisted since those students would qualify for less state and federal aid. By June 2016 the ALT wanted to use EFC for admission, but how it would be used was not entirely clear. From March to June 2016, the ALT engaged in several discussions about how students with high EFCs would be treated, what (if any)

specific limits would be used, and if any exceptions would be made if students fell outside the limits.

**Underrepresented populations: African-American.** The first cohort of students who enrolled at Alpha College were 71% Hispanic, 21% African-American, 5% Caucasian, and 3% Asian. As the second cohort of students was being recruited, there was an interest in increasing the number of African-American students who applied and accessed Alpha College. While there were no discernable targets for demographic mix, the desire to increase access among this demographic became clear in early 2016. During an admissions update at a January ALT meeting, the Dean commented on the low number of African-American students who had applied and expressed an interest to increase the number. He shared plans to contact schools with large African-American student populations. He also asked admissions to consider strategies for recruiting African-American students. During a February 2016 update, the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs raised a concern over the demographic mix of student applicants for the second cohort, but she was not specific in her concerns; however, at the same meeting, the Associate Dean of Student Success expressed concerns about the low number of African-American students. By March, the Dean shared with the ALT that the low number of African-American students expressing interest would be a concern of the Alpha College Board and that the ALT must consider strategies for increasing access. The concern of the Board indicated that serving a large number of African-American students was an important part of Alpha College's mission.

An April 2016 admissions update by the Assistant Director of Admissions reported that 27% of the students who had made a deposit (indicating an intention to enroll) were African-American. While the 27% marked an increase from the first cohort, there was no guarantee all these students would enroll. By late April and into May the admissions updates and discussions of the ALT focused less on the specific demographic breakdown of the students and focused more on meeting the overall enrollment targets for the second cohort. In fact, an agenda item for a May 2016 ALT meeting was titled, “How to get 180 Freshman by August 29.” The concerns of meeting the enrollment targets appeared to take precedent over ensuring the demographic mix. The impetus for the shift was budget based. The budget was built with an assumption of 180 students, and not meeting that target could have created affordability challenges for Alpha College. By the end of May, the Assistant Director of Admissions reported that the 180 target had been met. Part of her update included information about one high school that was sending predominately African-American students. The Dean’s interest in recruiting African-American students was piqued again and indicated a desire to partner with that and other high schools.

**Underrepresented populations: Undocumented.** A significant number of undocumented students were part of Alpha College’s first cohort, but providing access to undocumented students was challenging. As the ALT discussed during a March meeting, the financial model for Alpha College did not support undocumented students since they could neither complete a FAFSA nor easily participate in the work program. Despite challenges, Alpha College was active in its support for undocumented students. The

Director of Advancement pursued scholarships to support undocumented students including an announcement at an April ALT meeting that a corporation might provide scholarships to support a large number of undocumented students. Alpha College wanted to continue to provide access to undocumented students, but there would always be challenges and limits. The commitment to these students was evident, but Alpha College would need to make decisions about how to continue supporting them.

**Grit.** In October 2015, shortly after the first session ended, the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs reported that she received feedback from faculty advisors that they were not “seeing students advocate for their own learning.” At design grit was not clearly defined, but suggest that it would be manifested by students overcoming obstacles and using resources to succeed; however, faculty advisors expressed concerns about students not being proactive or following through with recommended support services and appointments. At an ALT meeting in late November, the Dean noticed similar behavior when he shared that while observing a class multiple students arrived late and caused disruptions to the learning process. He stated to the ALT that “this is a problem.” The Associate Dean of Academic Affairs shared that the faculty were “frustrated” over the tardiness, but also by students not being attentive when in class and not demonstrating appropriate college-level behavior. The Dean was quick to point out that he did not think this was a widespread problem as he noticed more appropriate behavior among other students, but discussions in early ALT meetings indicated that many students were not demonstrating characteristics desired of Alpha College students such as self-advocating, being pro-active, and showing maturity which expanded how Alpha College understood



and defined grit. To address this concern in the short-term, the Dean shared that during the Town Hall meeting that was held with students at the beginning of each session, he was going to address the theme of grit before the second session began in late October 2015. For the long-term, the ALT had discussions about altering the interview process to better measure grit among students prior to being granted access.

**Affordability: Little to No Debt**

During implementation, Alpha College needed to deliver on its promise to provide a “little to no debt” education to students. This work met with mostly positive results as potential donors were excited by and rallied around Alpha College, and the ALT remained committed to serving and providing access to low-income students. But threats from external politics and internal perceptions sparked conversations among the ALT.

**Student aid.** Perhaps the most prominent threat to the financial model of Alpha College during implementation was a state budget crisis. Due largely to partisan politics, the state legislature was unable to pass a budget and as a result, funds for student financial aid were not released to colleges and universities. There was uncertainty if and when the funds would be released, and by January 2016 discussions about the state budget crisis were common during ALT meetings and became a major concern. During a mid-January meeting, the Dean relayed a story about a state politician who visited and was “bedazzled by our students,” but the Dean expressed to the ALT, “And I’m like, that’s all very nice, but where is the [state funding]? These students won’t be here next year if [the state] can’t get its act together.” By March 2016 there was no resolution and

the ALT discussed the possibility that the funding might be permanently unavailable prompting the Dean to say, “this will affect Alpha College’s affordability.” If the funding was permanently cut, the Dean indicated that the Advancement Office would need to address the shortfall. The Director of Advancement estimated that an additional \$3,000 per student would need to be raised. In July 2016, the Director of Finance reported to the ALT that the state did disperse the funds for the current year, but the state had not fully resolved its stalemate and uncertainty remained moving forward.

**Donors and foundation support.** The Director of Advancement reported in August 2015 that building a donor base that is local but does not conflict or compete with the parent university “keeps her up a night.” Many of the supports provided by Alpha College, including the meal plan and lap tops were funded by donors and continued support for those programs was critical to sustain Alpha College’s affordability. Many of the discussions at ALT meetings during implementation focused largely on fund raising successes. During a November 2015 meeting, the Director of Advancement stated that many donors were enthusiastic about Alpha College, “it was exciting because [people want to know] how they can help the college.” The success of the fund raising efforts were shared at a June 2016 meeting when the Dean reported that \$900,000 in gifts were already identified. But since donations were an unreliable source of funding, the Dean and Director of Advancement did acknowledge that the fund raising efforts needed to be ongoing and were more high stakes for Alpha College.

**Work program.** The work program consistently struggled to get students to participate. Alpha College hired a Job Placement Director to assist students with finding

jobs, but by February 2016 a report during an ALT meeting indicated that 54% of students had jobs. The ALT acknowledged that the exact number of students employed was difficult to capture since not all students found jobs through the Job Placement Director or reported working to Alpha College. Over half the students reported employment, but the ALT was interested in increasing participation. At February and March 2016 ALT meetings, the Associate Dean of Student Success shared that the Job Placement Director was meeting with companies who might partner with Alpha College to provide jobs for students. The work program came up again during an April ALT meeting when the Dean was sharing information about a meeting he attended with a university who was interested in replicating Alpha College's model. The individual asked about the status of the work program as an integral part of the affordability and financial model of Alpha College. The Dean indicated that this "got him thinking about the work program" and he shared that he was going to investigate "best practices to improve placement into the work program" so that students can contribute to their own expenses to maintain the affordability of Alpha College.

**Parent university.** During implementation, the Dean of Alpha College wrote a letter to the student newspaper in which he noted, "much of [Alpha's] overhead . . . including utilities, technology support, and security is absorbed by the university." He went on to connect this support to the affordability of Alpha College when he wrote that if not for the support of the parent university, Alpha College students "would not otherwise . . . have the opportunity to . . . earn an associate's degree at minimal costs." During ALT meetings, there were challenges with reliance upon the parent university for

some of the resources and overhead support. As needs emerged at Alpha College related to resources supported by the parent university, Alpha College was subject to the financial health and operations of the parent university. For example, in early September 2015 the need for an additional support staff member was identified, but the Director of Finance indicated that getting the position approved (which needed to be done by the parent university) would be challenging since the parent university was engaging in budget reductions. Under the circumstances, he believed that the parent university would be unlikely to approve. The parent university remained supportive of Alpha College in many ways, but during implementation, the benefits seemed to be limited.

During implementation the discussion of adding a student fee was brought up to cover the costs of access that Alpha College students had to the resources of the parent university. For the first cohort of students, fees were not a part of the cost of attending Alpha College, but in August 2015, shortly after the first session began, the ALT engaged in discussions about implementing a fee for students. The Dean was adamant that any fee added was not motivated by revenue, but would be to ensure that Alpha College students were not being funded “on the backs of other students” from the parent university. Since Alpha College students had access to campus life activities, recreational facilities, and used resources of the parent university, it was important to the ALT that Alpha College students contribute to paying for the services received. Some members of the ALT expressed concern that the added fees could compromise Alpha College’s affordability, but others suggested it would be a minimal fee for everything the students received in return.

**Student Supports: Holistic Support**

Alpha College discovered that many of the student supports put in place during the design were anticipated and implemented without difficulty, but other supports faced challenges during implementation. There were student needs that emerged during implementation to which the ALT responded.

**Faculty advisors.** Upon design, the faculty advisors were to meet with their advisees as a group during time set aside on Wednesdays. Within the first few weeks of the first session, discussions among the ALT indicated that students were not reliably attending the Wednesday sessions. The lack of attendance concerned ALT members, and it was not conducive to the intrusive advising and support Alpha College wanted to provide its students. By September 2015, the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs announced at an ALT meeting that the Wednesday advisory sessions changed. Students still met as a group once or twice a semester, but the emphasis shifted to required individual meetings between the faculty advisors and students. The Associate Dean indicated that the change addressed the attendance problems with the Wednesday advisories, but also better facilitated the development of deeper relationships with the students to better identify both their academic and personal needs.

**Structured curriculum.** The structured curriculum designed for Alpha College faced immediate challenges during implementation. During an ALT meeting before classes began, students expressed interest in pursuing a nursing degree after completing at Alpha College despite being told that the curriculum was not designed for pre-nursing. The Associate Dean of Academic Affairs responded to the request by meeting with the

parent university's Dean of Nursing. It was quickly discovered that the Alpha College curriculum was not designed with the appropriate classes to support pre-nursing, including anatomy and physiology classes that would require lab space that Alpha College did not have. The Associate Dean continued to meet with the Nursing School to explore options, and she provided periodic updates at ALT meetings during the first year.

The delivery format of the curriculum was also a topic of discussion and change during the first year. In January 2016, after two sessions of courses had been offered, the topic of changing the 8-week format of the curriculum was brought to an ALT meeting for discussion. The proposal was to change from five 8-week sessions that ran year-round to two 16-week sessions with an 8-week summer session. The Associate Dean of Academic Affairs shared that the faculty advisors proposed the change for pedagogical reasons. Based on student performance in the first two sessions, the faculty felt the 8-week sessions were not enough time for deep learning to take place, nor did it offer opportunities for struggling students to recover and improve their grade if they struggled early. By February, the change was approved by the parent university and would be put in effect for all students in fall 2016.

The change had the added value, the Dean pointed out, of aligning better with schedules of most four-year colleges and universities to better prepare Alpha College students for transfer expectations. The transfer mission and focus of the curriculum was evident during implementation and was emphasized by the hiring of a College Transition Advisor in summer 2016. This position was charged with providing full-service support for transfer: arranging college visits, organizing student panels of transfer students,

assisting with the application process, and meeting individually with students to engage in transfer planning. While the College Transition Advisor reported many students were eager, prepared, and well-positioned to transfer, she reported at a July 2017 ALT meeting that many other students did not appear interested in transferring. She wondered what should be communicated to these students about other options. The ALT reiterated that while they will support students who cannot or do not transfer, the message has to be clear that “the Alpha College curriculum is the curriculum. It is transfer-focused.” Continued conversations at ALT meetings indicated that most students came to Alpha College fully expecting to transfer, but the ALT discovered that many students were challenged with transferring.

**Academic supports.** During almost every ALT meeting in the first year, finding the best way to provide tutoring to students was a topic of discussion. Tutoring was an essential academic support provided, but getting students to take advantage of the service proved to be challenging. During a September ALT meeting the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs noted that available tutoring appointments did not always align with student schedules. Tutoring was one of the services being leveraged from the parent university and sharing the resource often resulted in limited availability of tutors. The ALT responded by recruiting volunteers to help provide tutoring services and exploring partnerships with organizations that provided tutoring. Once enough tutors were found, another challenge presented itself. Students who needed tutoring were not attending. The Associate Dean of Student Success indicated during an ALT meeting that students have shared feeling a “stigma associated with seeking tutoring.” The ALT needed to respond

to this concern with actions that effectively provided academic support to students in an environment in which students were comfortable accessing them.

**Personal well-being.** By an early September ALT meeting it was clear that Alpha College was intrusively monitoring and being attentive to the needs of students. Upon design, it was anticipated that students who accessed Alpha College would need personal support, and the inclusion of a Social Worker position as part of the design was intentional. The meal plan and lap top program were also anticipated needs of the target student population. The Dean stated that many of the students who came to Alpha College were on a free and reduced lunch program, and “that need didn’t go away just because they’re in college.” During implementation, other needs emerged that were not initially planned for in the design. By October 2016 the ALT discovered that students were facing housing insecurity, and by April 2016 the Dean stated during an ALT meeting that students are facing “serious housing needs.” Even with Alpha College’s affordability, the faculty were reporting that students were not able to purchase books for class due to the cost, and other students were struggling to pay off balances on their student accounts. In the most serious of cases, students found themselves in need of legal assistance. In January, the ALT engaged in a discussion about the possibility of providing daycare for children of Alpha College students as the ALT saw this as an increasing need and as a common reason for lack of attendance. By developing relationships with students and monitoring them intrusively, the ALT identified student needs to address to support their personal well-being.



### From Design to Implementation

The next section presents findings from interviews conducted in 2019 with six members of the ALT. Actions taken and decisions made by the ALT to respond to challenges and opportunities that were introduced during the first year of implementation are detailed. Not all actions and decisions taken by the ALT are documented in this section, but those presented represent important actions and decisions in the evolution of Alpha College for how they deviated from or reinforced features of the initial design and how they relate to the completion agenda themes of access, affordability, and student supports. Table 6 provides an overview of the design features and implementation issues introduced earlier and addressed in this section.

Table 6

#### *Design Features and Implementation Issues*

Design Feature	Implementation Issues
Access: Competitive and Limited	
• Academic Performance	Some students did not perform as expected
• Low-Income	Need to increase financial aid eligible students
• Underrepresented Populations	Desire to increase number of African-American and undocumented students
• Grit	Students not demonstrating expected behavior
Affordability: Little to no debt	
• Student Aid	State budget crisis threatened student aid allocations

• Donors and Foundation Support	Increased reliance on donor and foundation support
• Work Program	Students not participating in the work program
• Parent University	Uncertain relationship with the parent university
Student Supports: Holistic Supports	
• Faculty Advisors	Students not attending group advising sessions
• Structured Curriculum	Faculty identified concerns with 8-week format  Students expressed interest in other areas of study  Transfer was presented challenges to some students
• Academic Supports	Getting students to attend tutoring was a challenge
• Personal Well-Being	Emerging needs identified by the ALT

### Access

During the first year of implementation, discussions about who was provided access to Alpha College were prevalent. During ALT meetings, the Dean requested that the interview process be reviewed and refined to better admit students who were “the right fit” and that conscious efforts be made to better recruit and enroll African American and undocumented students. Changes made to the admission process for Alpha College that addressed concerns about academic performance, low-income status, and grit New

partnerships and recruiting strategies began to address the desire of increased numbers of African American and undocumented students.

### **From Interview to Pre-Review**

All students who applied to Alpha College as part of the first cohort received an interview. The Associate Director of Admissions said that “at the design phase, the decision was made . . . to interview all applicants. It was daunting, but the interview was an important part of the design.” After the first cohort, a change was made to invite students to interview after a “pre-review” of the application. The Associate Director said that after year one, “we had a much better sense of the type of student we were looking for, and based on a year of experience the admission process could be refined and interviews limited.” According to the Assistant Director of Admissions, the typical reasons for not being invited to an interview were “grades or financial need”—both of which became part of the pre-review.

While a 2.5 GPA and 17 ACT were the academic guidelines for admission, the Associate Director of Admissions indicated that because the first class took longer to fill, students were accepted who “dipped below” the guidelines. He made the point that the guidelines were somewhat arbitrary at first and since there was no historical data for how students would perform at Alpha College based on those guidelines, accepting students who fell outside those requirements was a chance they took for the first cohort. After students began to struggle in the first year, especially students who came from a specific network of schools, the ALT reviewed student data and used what they were learning about students to make more informed decisions about who they admitted. Student

performance at Alpha College could be compared to high school GPAs and ACT scores (when reported, test scores remained optional) to arrive at more reliable guidelines to admit students who met Alpha College's academic expectations and would be more likely to succeed.

In addition to going outside the GPA and ACT guidelines for the first cohort, Alpha College also accepted students who did not meet the expected level of financial need. During implementation the Dean wanted to increase the number of students who qualified for state and federal aid from 88% for the first cohort to 98% for the following cohorts. The desire to increase the number of aid eligible students was certainly motivated by the financial model of Alpha College which was dependent upon students qualifying for state and federal aid; however, the Associate Director of Admissions also spoke to the importance of increasing access to low income students citing "serving the target population" as the primary rationale. Whatever motivated the focus on increased access to low-income students, the Associate Director indicated that "in year two, EFC was more critical." EFC represented a tangible metric for determining need and became a part of the pre-review process. The Assistant Director of Admissions reinforced EFC as more important in year two and a critical part of the pre-review. When asked about the specific amounts of EFC used to make decisions during the pre-review the Assistant Director did not offer details, but described the process as "holistic . . . like putting a puzzle together." EFC and academic performance expectations remained guidelines during the pre-review, but there were other factors in addition to academic performance and low-income status that needed to be considered before access was granted.

The change from all applicants getting an interview to a pre-review process with students being invited to an interview was motivated by providing access to students who were the “right fit,” the most likely to succeed, and ensuring that Alpha College served its target population. The Associate Director of Admissions said there were also concerns of “optics.” Alpha College was being portrayed as serving a particular population of students, and it was important to everyone involved that access was provided to those students.

Students who made it through the pre-review were invited for an interview. The interview was where, according to the Associate Director of Admissions, we started to get at “grit.” During implementation faculty advisors and staff at Alpha College expressed concerns over students not demonstrating the expected level of “grit” and self-advocacy. Changes to the interview process began to address this concern. The Assistant Director of Admissions said, “one of the biggest changes we made from year one to year two was completely changing the questions that were asked on the interview rubric.” She said Alpha College knew what they were looking for in students during the first year, but they did not know how to ask questions to get at it; however, she said “once we had students in the building we realized there were [better] questions we should be asking.” When faculty advisors and staff saw successful students demonstrate grit, they knew they wanted to find a way to capture those qualities during the interviews. The Assistant Director of Admissions explained the change:

“We changed our rubric . . . and allowed for students to tell us a little more narrative, a little more about their experiences in high school . . . [to] give us

specific examples of how they navigated an issue or problem or class they struggled with—did they seek assistance at their high school, who did they speak to? So we ask very specific questions to students and ask them to give us actual examples of what they did. We realized that those were the students that even if they struggled in high school and did not have the best grades, but if they are able to advocate for themselves, that tells us that student will be potentially successful in our program because they know where to ask questions and they're not afraid of asking questions. That's number one. If you're not afraid to ask questions you're going to continue to ask questions until you find your answer, until you find the person who is going to help you.”

These detailed questions marked an evolution in the interview process. By asking students to provide more specific responses, Alpha College believed they could better identify students who demonstrated grit. The Assistant Director indicated that questions for the first cohort were very general and gathered more information about the student's involvement in co-curricular activities and what they knew about Alpha College, but they did not search for specific character attributes that demonstrated the ability to overcome obstacles and self-advocate. Upon design, these character attributes were thought to be likely predictors of success at Alpha College, so it was important to assess this quality as part of the admissions process.

Members of the ALT noted another important change that occurred in the interview process. For the first cohort, representatives from the parent university and volunteers conducted the interviews. The Dean indicated that after the first cohort Alpha

College faculty advisors and staff began to conduct the interviews. The Assistant Director of Admissions said that moving to Alpha College faculty advisors and staff made a significant difference since “the Alpha College faculty and staff know the program and know Alpha College better than anyone else . . . and are best qualified to determine if students can demonstrate the type of self-advocacy Alpha College looks for.” By Alpha College faculty advisors and staff taking over the interview process, it allowed the “right fit” to start being defined by those implementing and working with students at Alpha College rather than those who designed the college.

### **Targeted Recruiting Strategies and Partnerships**

The ALT addressed access issues to underrepresented populations by using targeting recruiting strategies and developing partnerships. The Associate Director of Admissions said that for the second cohort, there was an interest in increasing enrollment among African-American students, and the Dean expressed a desire to increase enrollment among African-American students during several ALT meetings the first year. The Assistant Director of Admissions said that part of the strategy for addressing this issue was engaging with a consultant to help identify recruiting strategies for African-American students. As a result of working with the consultant, a targeting marketing campaign was created. The Assistant Director of Admissions described the effort:

“We partnered with a radio network that has three different stations that promote heavily within the African-American community. Alpha College had commercials on the radio station and brought a student in to the station to talk about her experience at Alpha College to promote the College. We also partnered with a

company that does promotions on public transit. We used maps to determine key recruiting markets and advertised for about two months on the transit lines used by the target markets.”

The Assistant Director indicated that measuring the effectiveness of the campaign has been difficult. Whether students were drawn to Alpha College because of the campaign or for other reasons was challenging to determine, but she reported an increase in applications among African-American students.

Alpha College developed partnerships to help with efforts to increase the African-American enrollment. Alpha College partnered with a national organization specializing in improving educational opportunities for young African-American men. Alpha College routinely worked with this organization to recruit students to Alpha College. The Dean discussed another external partnership that was a result of an internal initiative created by the faculty advisors to support the recruitment and retention of African-American male students:

“Data showed that our highest attrition rate has been with African-American men. And so some faculty members have created Black Men for Success (BMS). The key feature is, besides socials . . . our students are linked to mentors. And those mentors are successful, young men of color who are close in age to Alpha College students and are mentors. The Alpha College students can relate to them and see the potential for success reflected in someone like them.”

In addition to recruiting and admitting more African-American students, the BMS addresses enrollment numbers through retention of current students.



Partnerships were also developed to increase access to and serve undocumented students. Serving undocumented students was a part of Alpha College's mission, and while Alpha College fully funded all its undocumented students in the first year, the Associate Director of Admissions stated that serving undocumented students would be an ongoing challenge. He indicated that part of the challenge was a result of the success in the first year:

“Because we had a decent size undocumented population, that word gets out there. That's probably one of the biggest things that got out there. Not only to the students and the parents, but to the high school counselors that are calling us and asking about the process and how to get their students through the process. It became challenging to select students from the undocumented student population because we knew how much money we had to spend, how many scholarships we had earmarked for these students we had to be a lot more selective with that population even compared to our general Alpha College population.”

Despite the challenges, he noted, Alpha College remained committed to providing access and services to undocumented students, and Alpha College pursued partnerships with organizations to provide support and financing. Local and national organizations worked with Alpha College to provide scholarships, mentors, and legal assistance. The Assistant Director of Admissions said that Alpha College has maintained a population of undocumented students though the financial model will always make increasing the enrollment challenging. Undocumented students will always require more resources from Alpha College, and while the partnerships help, there will be limits.

### **Affordability**

The “little to no debt” promise of Alpha College was a key design feature. During the first year uncertainty about how the state budget crisis would impact Alpha College’s affordability was a significant concern beyond the control of the ALT. The concerns about state funding turned the spotlight on Alpha College’s other design features related to affordability: donor and foundation support, the work program, and the relationship with the parent university. To address challenges and threats to the affordability of Alpha College, the ALT intensified its focus on donor and foundation support as the other features of affordability remained uncertain.

### **Reliance on Student Aid**

One of the features of Alpha College’s design related to affordability that was never fully realized was the work program; however, both the Associate Director of Admissions and the Dean down played the contribution of the work program to the affordability and financial model. The Associate Director of Admissions indicated that the money students earned from working supplemented total costs of attending Alpha College, but was not connected to the financial model in a concrete way, “money earned was not directly diverted to the cost of attending [tuition or books].” The Dean quickly responded “no” when asked whether or not the work program was ever implemented in a significant way, but directly turned his attention to the reliance on student financial aid. He recognized that many Alpha College students need to work to help support families and address some of their own needs, but “our model is federal and state aid.” The

reliance on student aid for the affordability of Alpha College was further reinforced as the relationship with the parent university seemed to become less about financial benefit.

### **A Space and a Brand**

The Dean said, “The parent university provided us with space and a brand.”

Despite some early indications that Alpha College might try to distinguish itself from the parent university with its own distinct identity, Alpha College quickly embraced the connection to the parent university. The Assistant Director of Admission confirmed the power of the parent university’s brand when she stated that “the connection to the parent university is an attractive feature to many prospective students.” The Associate Dean of Student Success said, “they [the ALT] want Alpha College students to see themselves as part of the parent university.” In fact, the addition of a fee for Alpha College students was implemented to cover, in large part, the access that Alpha College students had to all the resources of the parent university. Despite the benefits Alpha College received from the association with and “brand” of the parent university, the Dean expressed discontent with the relationship when he stated, “The financial resources provided by the parent university have been less than desired.” Alpha College was designed to benefit from the parent university by leveraging its resources; however, Alpha College was left to raise most of the money needed for capital expenditures. The Dean also commented that the pace at which the parent university operates often conflicts with the entrepreneurial spirit and venture of Alpha College. The benefits from the relationship with the parent university seemed to evolve from one of financial support to recruiting and engagement of students.

### **Functional Advancement Office**

The evolving relationship with the parent university left Alpha College more reliant upon donor and foundation support. The Dean shared that while the parent university provided a building for Alpha College, renovation of classroom space in that building into a student commons needed to be funded by donors; and while the parent university provided technical support for Alpha College, the computers and equipment for a computer lab needed to be funded by donors. During the first year, the Dean and Director of Advancement spent significant time meeting with donors. Both the Dean and Associate Dean of Academic Affairs indicated that much of the Dean's time is currently spent on the road gathering donor support. While Alpha College's budget is small relative to many two-year schools and the especially when compared to the parent university, the Dean reported that about half of the Alpha College budget needs to be raised through donations. The financial model of Alpha College was always reliant upon the support of donors and a strong foundation; however, the struggling work program and changing relationship with the parent university intensified that reliance prompting the Dean to say that a "functional advancement office is essential to any replication efforts."

### **Student Supports**

Alpha College was intentional during the design phase to predict and address supports that students would need to be successful. The supports provided were attentive to both in-class and out of class challenges. There were multiple issues that emerged during implementation, and the ALT was responsive to emerging supports based on student need, faculty advisor input, and student data.

### **Foundation for Intrusive Advising**

The design of Alpha College emphasized the dual role of faculty as content experts and advisors/coaches. This design feature did not change dramatically during implementation, but the role of the faculty advisor experienced a quick change almost immediately. Input from the faculty advisors indicated that students were not attending the group advisory sessions, so the change was made to move toward required individual meetings. This change laid the foundation for Alpha College's intrusive advising approach that was recognized during interviews as a key to Alpha College's ongoing support of students.

As Alpha College grew, concerns were expressed about how they could remain in touch with students as enrollment increased. The Associate Director of Admissions expressed how impressed he was with how intrusive Alpha College was with monitoring its students: "The holistic support and intrusiveness extended all the way to the leadership and the fact that the Dean knew so many details about the students was impressive." He said, "community colleges need to be more intrusive. They cannot be closed in the same way as Alpha College, but finding ways to be more intrusive is important." He wondered how Alpha College would maintain the same level of intrusiveness as they move closer to their enrollment target.

The faculty advisor and student relationship as a foundation for identifying and addressing student needs surfaced as members of the ALT talked about enrollment growth at Alpha College. The Associate Dean of Academic Affairs said that she no longer knows the students as personally as she once did since enrollment has increased;

however, she noted that the faculty advisor and student relationship remains small and that can serve as the foundation for continuing the intrusiveness and relationships. She indicated that even as Alpha College gets closer to its capacity of 400, she had a long-term plan to keep the faculty advisor to student ratio at 1:20 which has remained consistent since opening.

The Associate Dean of Academic Affairs stated that the faculty advisor model has been critical to the success of Alpha College, “the faculty are bought into the mission and work collaboratively with other areas of the college to meet all the needs of students.” She stressed the prioritization of this model when she shared how decisions about hiring were made with mission in mind:

“Right from the beginning, in our job ad, we say we are looking for people who want to focus on teaching, looking for people with experience serving students we are seeking to serve . . . students from diverse backgrounds, minority students, and . . . we also look for people with mentoring experience . . . that was key. And we ask about these experiences in the interview, and we also want to know what their classroom looks like—how they interact with students in and out of the classroom. We want people who are creative and innovative in the classroom. Who will work with students outside the classroom during office hours, etc. We really try to get a sense of their fit, not just for teaching.”

The Associate Director of Admission said that “relationships are what will get students through—and these relationships started with the faculty advisor. This model introduces the intrusive support model that extends all the way up to the leadership” The College

Transition Advisor said that “the relationship built with the students is important and it happens across the board, but the faculty advisor model is key to Alpha College’s success.” She went on to say that without the faculty advising model Alpha College would not work since it is the foundation for relationships that help identify and address student needs. The importance of the faculty advisor model was also mentioned by the Assistant Director of Admission who stated that it was an attractive feature for many students, “they like the idea of developing a close relationship.” The refocusing of the faculty advisor and student meetings from group based (which still happens during Wednesday advisories) to be more about building individual relationships was an early change and was identified by the ALT as a powerful support for students.

### **The Expanding Curriculum**

The curriculum of Alpha College was designed to be highly structured with three Associate Degree options: Liberal Arts, Social and Behavioral Sciences, and Business. The change from 8-week sessions to 16-week sessions marked an immediate change in how the curriculum was delivered at Alpha College, but changes continued well into implementation. When students began at Alpha College in 2015, they challenged the limited curriculum by expressing interest in nursing. The Associate Dean of Academic Affairs responded by meeting with the Dean of Nursing at the parent university and this responsiveness to the interests and needs of students characterized significant changes that occurred in the curriculum.

During an interview, the Associate Dean also provided an update on the nursing program:

“We were saying to students, if you are interested in nursing you don’t want to come here, but they were coming. The nursing school was always willing to collaborate . . . but they don’t accept transfers so they were making an exception for us. Altering our structured curriculum to fit in the nursing prerequisite courses was challenging, and there were also concerns if students could persist in the challenging program. After continued collaboration, a small group beginning fall 2019 will be provisionally admitted [to Alpha College] as pre-nursing students. In the first year they will take some foundational non-lab science courses. At the end of the first year they will make a formal application to nursing. They will need to have a 3.0GPA and a 23 ACT [at the end of the first year at Alpha College]. Because the ACT is not required of students, a prep class will be offered for those who need it. In the second year [if accepted into the nursing program] they will continue as Alpha College students, but will be on the campus of the parent university one day a week taking anatomy and physiology courses.”

The Associate Dean said that they will “see how this experiment goes” and planned to continue offering the program, but she shared that Alpha College will not actively recruit for the nursing program and indicated that it “will never be a huge component of what we do.”

Other curriculum changes were initiated related to the limited math offerings at Alpha College. The designed curriculum of Alpha College offered one math course to all students: a social science focused statistics course. The Associate Dean of Academic Affairs noted, “we realized after the first class graduated and went on to other colleges,



and wanted to major in science or computers science or pre-med . . . that they were disadvantaged not having some of the math prerequisite courses. We also realized that many of them were prepared to take those courses while at Alpha College.” She said that her response, the response of the faculty advisors, and the ALT was, “here’s what the students need, and let’s modify.” The modifications included the development of additional math courses for qualified students so they would be better prepared after transfer in STEM related fields. The Associate Dean cautioned, “this is not cost free. We will need a new math faculty member.” But the modifications to the curriculum are moving forward despite the additional cost to Alpha College.

Another curriculum change was the addition of a required one-credit “introduction to college” course students take in their first fall semester. The Assistant Dean of Student Success described the course as addressing study skills, time and stress management, goal setting, and other typical features of these types of courses; however, he indicated that “if we had to boil it down, the point [of the course] is to make sure students register for spring semester.” He discussed the predictive nature of spring registration as a predictor for persistence and said the course is designed to provide structured supports, but is really motivated by spring registration. The power of the course, he said, was demonstrated by the 2016 cohort of students (pre-requirement) having a 40% registration completion by the registration deadline, while over 80% of the 2017 cohort (required to take the course) registered by the deadline. This course served the dual purpose of supporting first-semester students, but also providing an intrusive and structured mechanism for motivating and monitoring fall to spring registration.

While the addition of the introduction to college course, the math courses and pre-nursing program signaled a shift in the limited curriculum of Alpha College's design, the ALT remained true to the original curriculum in many ways. The Associate Dean of Academic Affairs indicated that the pre-nursing curriculum was woven into and added to the Social Sciences track rather than being added as a new track. Students who complete the pre-nursing program in the Social Sciences area will earn 71 credits in two years rather than the 62 hours of most students in Social Sciences. The same was true of a pre-STEM program that was being developed. The Associate Dean stated that the pre-STEM courses would be woven into and added to the Liberal Arts degree. Even with the changes, the ALT was holding firm on the primary mission of offering Liberal Arts focused Associate of Arts degrees.

The ALT was changing the curriculum to meet student needs and interests. The Dean suggested that Alpha College and the ALT "risk being tone deaf" if they are not responsive to the types of programs the students are asking for, and he expressed an interest in expanding programs in other areas such as criminal justice and cyber security. He said these expansions are not out of a desire to increase enrollment, but "to meet the needs of the target population."

### **Transfer Challenges**

The Alpha College curriculum was designed as a transfer curriculum with the expectation that all students will graduate and transfer. Some of the changes made to the curriculum, especially the added math courses, were made to support a smoother transfer for students. Alpha College hired a College Transition Advisor to support the transfer

mission. The work of the College Transition Advisor was to create a clear path to transfer clear by removing obstacles so that students could see transfer as a viable next step. As the first cohort of students prepared to transfer, some challenges arose to the transfer mission.

The Associate Dean of Academic Affairs said there are significant financial considerations that are an obstacle for transfer. She said, “It’s really funding dependent on where the students go” and that the primary work of the College Transition Advisor has been “the financial piece . . . that’s her main focus. Making sure students are going places where they are not going to take on substantial debt.” The Associate Dean said she does not want Alpha College students to be among those with high default rates. She said ultimately it is up to the students where they go and how much debt they take on, but the ALT has been intentional about supporting students with accessible and affordable transfer choices. She said the College Transition Advisor “makes sure they are going places where they are supported . . . and is hospitable to undocumented students, but so much of it comes down to finances.”

The College Transition Advisor confirmed that the most significant challenge to transfer is finances. She said a large part of her work is dedicated to securing scholarships and other sources of financial support. She said she works with the students early to help them plan for transfer and to consider places that provide strong academic and personal supports, that are affordable, and have experience enrolling minority, low-income students. But, she said, unless students graduate Alpha College with a 3.5 GPA scholarship options are scarce.

The Associate Dean of Academic Affairs and College Transition Advisor both described the desire to find transfer options that would provide students with the same level of support and access they had while at Alpha College, but the affordability of transfer options continued to be identified as an obstacle. The ALT's commitment to finding support for students to transfer demonstrated that Alpha College's supports and approach to an affordable education extend beyond the two-years at Alpha College.

### **Fellows Program**

During implementation the ALT addressed consistent and early challenges with providing tutoring support to students. At design there were problems with having enough tutors to meet demand, but, according to the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs, the real problem was "we couldn't get students to come." No matter how the faculty advisors and staff tried, they could not get students to attend. The Associate Dean explained how the ALT responded:

"We developed peer tutoring. The peer tutoring started off with writing fellows. These were second year students . . . and a faculty advisor developed a model where [the second year] students would be trained to be writing tutors. Now we have math and business fellows. And maybe science fellows next. The students are paid. The fellows are attached to a class and hold office hours and it's been really successful . . . both for the tutors and for helping students feel more confident in those areas."

The Associate Dean indicated that the fellows program reduced the reliance on the parent university for this service, was more student-friendly, normalized tutoring and Alpha

College saw an increase in the number of students using tutoring. The Dean also commented on the fellows program saying that in addition to the academic benefit for the student, it removed a stigma associated with tutoring. The Dean suggested that the students were more comfortable working with a peer than going over to the parent university's tutoring center which can be a stigma and send a message that they "don't belong."

### **Hardship Funds**

How Alpha College approached supporting the personal well-being of students was best expressed by the Assistant Dean of Student Success who said:

"There isn't really anything we wouldn't at least consider in supporting our students, especially as it pertains to their life outside the classroom. And if especially if that life outside the classroom is potentially disruptive to what they need to be able to do as students . . . I would say everything we do funnels toward giving them the stability they need to be successful students."

Alpha College was intentional about putting supports in place to assist students. The meal plan, lap tops, social worker, and tutoring services are among the supports that were put in place at design. During implementation, other needs emerged to which the ALT responded.

Despite Alpha College's affordability, faculty advisors were reporting that students were having trouble purchasing books or paying off small balances on their student account. The ALT responded by creating a "hardship fund" that students could access, and the Assistant Dean of Student Success said that textbook support is common,

but Alpha College is ready to “companion students through whatever may come.” The Assistant Director of Admission said students know if they have emergencies they can contact the Assistant Dean of Student Success.

In addition to the emergency funds that come up, the ALT discovered that an increasing number of students faced housing insecurity. The Assistant Dean of Student Success said that Alpha College could address the issue by offering a residential option, but he quickly noted that would compromise the affordability of Alpha College. Instead, he said, Alpha College shows they care by supporting these students through partnerships with external agencies that help provide students in need with housing options.

The holistic supports that Alpha College wants to provide to students seems possible through the faculty advisor and student relationship that serves as the foundation for continuous and intrusive monitoring of student needs. As other needs emerged, such as childcare, legal assistance with immigration issues, and transportation challenges, the faculty advisors and ALT are able to identify the needs and work collaboratively to provide students the holistic supports they need to succeed.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter provided findings related to the design of Alpha College, the decision-making process of the ALT, key issues that emerged during implementation, and how the ALT responded to those key issues to provide low-income minority students with access to an affordable education with holistic supports. The next chapter considers the findings in the context of the completion agenda literature and offers a discussion of how Alpha College’s design and implementation aligned with completion agenda themes

and what implications for practice the findings present. The following chapter also offers suggestions for future research on Alpha College.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine Alpha College within the context of and as a response to the completion agenda themes of access, affordability, and student supports, and to consider how the Administrative Leadership Team (ALT) made decisions during implementation to address design features of Alpha College connected to the completion agenda themes. An instrumental case study methodology was used to gain deep insight into Alpha College's design as a new two-year college and to understand Alpha College within the context of and as a response to the completion agenda. The data used was a year of observation notes from ALT meetings, six interviews conducted in 2019 with individuals who served on the ALT between 2015 and 2017, and documents and media coverage.

This chapter re-engages literature on the completion agenda and discusses the findings within the context of the research. Decisions made about the themes of access, affordability, and student supports are discussed, the role of leadership within the completion agenda literature is considered, implications for practice are offered, and based on the findings of this study, future directions for research are suggested.



### **Access**

The College Board (2008) and AACC (2012) were adamant that as community colleges focused more intently on completion, access could not be compromised. “Democracy’s Colleges” (2010) stated that the challenge of increasing completion needed to be addressed “while holding firmly to traditional values of access, opportunity, and quality,” and the AACC (2012) argued that any movement that “abandons the open-door would be to betray the historic mission of these institutions [community colleges]” (p. 20). Alpha College was designed with the intent of providing access to a limited and carefully defined population of students, and the findings revealed that during implementation, the ALT reviewed and refined the selection and admission process to more clearly identify students who were “the right fit” and would benefit most from Alpha College. In this way, Alpha College’s treatment of access was contrary to the completion agenda literature which called for a protection of open access.

Alpha College’s implementation of the pre-review process limited access based on academic performance. The findings of this study demonstrated that Alpha College restricted access based on academic preparedness, and further refined their process during implementation to be more selective when the ALT discovered that many students struggled academically. Alpha College’s use of GPA and ACT guidelines for admission limited access to academically underprepared students, and the use of the guidelines became more refined as additional data on student performance was collected and indicated academic characteristics of students most likely to succeed. By further

restricting access based on academic performance, Alpha College manifested concerns expressed in the completion agenda literature about the potential for underprepared students being denied access in the name of student success and completion (Bragg & Durham, 2012 & McPhail, 2011). Bragg and Durham (2012) worried about the potential for restricted access and said that the “allure of raising completion rates by reducing access of students thought unprepared was too attractive to deny” (p. 120). Alpha College addressed a student success problem by further refining and limiting access to students who were most predicted to succeed.

The findings suggested that Alpha College defined “the right fit” in ways beyond academic performance. The ALT refined their interview process to better measure “grit,” a desired characteristic of Alpha College students. The findings of this research indicated that Alpha College never found a systematic way of assessing or measuring grit; however, members of the ALT reported that the interview process evolved to include questions that best assessed a student’s ability to self-advocate and to be “potentially successful in our program.” Alpha College was looking for students who were academically prepared, but who also possessed the ability to take advantage of services to succeed within the design of Alpha College.

Changes made to the admissions and interview process were made with a focus on completion. If students demonstrated they were the “right fit,” they were predicted to be most likely to succeed at Alpha College; however, not all decisions about access were driven by completion. Within the context of completion agenda literature, the access Alpha College provided was more complex than simply limiting access to underprepared

students. The findings of this study revealed that “the right fit” for Alpha College included providing access to a clearly defined student demographic. This student population was defined at the design phase; however, the ALT expressed concerns during implementation about the limited number of students gaining access from the target population and refined the criteria to better provide access to underrepresented and low-income students.

Alpha College’s target student population aligns with completion agenda imperatives focusing on providing access to underrepresented populations. Maintaining the open door of community colleges was not enough to reach completion targets, but increased access was needed for traditionally underrepresented populations in order to dramatically increase completion (Bailey, 2012; Hauptman, 2012). To this end, completion agenda literature was consistent in its call for conscious efforts to ensure access for students who still struggle to gain access (AACC, 2012; Democracy’s Colleges, 2010; McPhail, 2011). While Alpha College limited access based on academic performance and grit, the conscious efforts to increase access among traditionally underserved students were exemplified in the findings of this study. The ALT made decisions to refine the selection process and engage in targeted recruiting efforts and develop partnerships that were focused on increasing access to the students most at risk of not gaining access to and completing higher education. The partnerships and recruiting efforts for African-American students and undocumented students aligned with this mission, as did the decision to use EFC as a factor for selection. While the use of EFC as an admission criterion cannot be overlooked as a critical component of Alpha College’s

financial model, the discussions of the ALT on the use of EFC ensured that access to the most economically disadvantaged students was protected.

Alpha College prioritized limiting access by continuously reviewing and refining the selection processes to maximize access to a target student population. While this practice was assumed to have positive effects on the success and completion of students, it posed a dichotomy pointed out by the Associate Director of Admissions:

“We had an acceptance rate of around 30% which was comparable to some highly competitive colleges and universities. We talked about being an institution that wanted to be open and welcoming to students, but we had [limits]. It created a unique problem for us. We were designed to serve a clearly defined underserved population, but many kids couldn’t get in because it was so competitive.”

The competitive nature of Alpha College’s access aligned with some of the completion agenda literature that challenged the open door practices of community colleges. Scherer and Anson (2014) suggested that community colleges sacrifice the sacredness of open access and institute entry requirements. They argued that this change, while limiting access to students, would provide access to students who are prepared for the rigors of college level coursework and would set students up to succeed. Scherer and Anson (2014) did not advocate for the same limitations as Alpha College, but Alpha College’s approach to access is aligned with Scherer and Anson (2014) in many ways as the admissions, interview, and selection process were put in place and refined to provide access to students who would most likely benefit from Alpha College. Scherer and

Anson's (2014) research considered alongside the practices of Alpha College has implications for revisiting the open door practices of community colleges.

### **Affordability**

The increasing costs of higher education was identified as a primary obstacle to accessing and completing a post-secondary credential for many students (ACSFA, 2010; College Board, 2008; Marcus, 2017; Scott-Clayton, 2017). Affordability was a defining feature of community colleges, and completion agenda literature consistently implored higher education to "control" the rising costs of attaining a post-secondary credential (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014; College Board, 2008). Through a combination of state and federal student aid, donor support, a work program, and a partnership with the parent university, Alpha College designed a financial model which allowed students to complete a degree with "little to no debt." The findings of the research suggested that Alpha College was successful during implementation in providing students with a little to no debt education. In addition to providing access to low-income students who qualified for state and federal funding, Alpha College fully funded undocumented students, provided additional funds to students through donor-funded scholarships, and supported a work program with a job placement specialist. Alpha College's financial model aligned well with completion agenda research on affordability; however, the findings of this research also revealed threats to Alpha College's financial model and affordability.

When the Dean instructed the ALT to increase the number of students eligible for state and federal student aid from 88% (for the first cohort) to 98% for all subsequent cohorts, the decision demonstrated a commitment to serving low-income students, but

also signaled a heavy reliance on state and federal funding as part of the affordability model. The reliance on state and federal funding was emphasized when the Dean was asked about the struggling work program as part of the financial model. The Dean shared that the program never got off the ground, but he did not view it as a problem by stating, “our model is state and federal aid.” The findings revealed that during implementation Alpha College was threatened by a state budget crisis that, according to the Dean, “would threaten Alpha College’s affordability.” Research on the affordability of higher education pointed out that tuition and fees have grown at disproportionate rates to the funds available for student financial aid (Marcus, 2017 & Scott-Clayton, 2017). Additionally, funding for higher education overall has been cut and colleges and universities have responded by increasing the most predictable and controllable sources of income: tuition and fees (ACSFA, 2013; Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Marcus, 2017; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2015; Scott-Clayton, 2017). Alpha College’s reliance on state and federal aid as the foundation for affordability was risky in an environment when student aid allocations are slowly rising and cuts are being made for higher education funding (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). Further cuts or another state budget crisis could severely threaten Alpha College’s affordability.

When Alpha College faced the state budget crisis, one of the responses by the ALT was to address the shortfall with additional donor support. Alpha College enjoyed early success with fundraising efforts with the Director of Advancement alluding to “excitement” about Alpha College’s mission as the reason for generous giving. While increasing donor funds was an ostensibly good solution to cover gaps in funding, it too

presented an unreliable source of income and funding. The findings also revealed that Alpha College was moving away from its financial reliance on the parent university during implementation. The Dean expressed that the financial support from the parent university ended up being “less than desirous” and challenges with tutoring resulted in an approach that relied less on the parent university. While Alpha College still leveraged some resources from the parent university, less dependence on the parent university for financial support made Alpha College even more reliant upon the unstable sources of state and federal funding and donor support.

The literature on the completion agenda was adamant about the need to address the “total cost” of higher education. (ACSFA, 2010; Bettinger, Long, Oreopoulos, & Sanboonmatsu, 2009; College Board, 2008; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2015). The total cost of higher education included, “not just tuition and fees, but also costs of books, transportation, food and housing” (Page & Scott-Clayton 2015). The College Board (2008) addressed this in a similar manner when it argued that how students are funded needed to be rethought, and that higher education needs to address unexpected costs with supplementary funds. Alpha College found ways to address this need at design and during implementation. Part of Alpha College’s design distributed lap tops to all students. The lap tops were included to “level the playing field” and provide all students with some of the tools needed to be successful college students. The lap tops had the added benefit of removing cost from accessing the tools. During implementation, the ALT discovered that, despite the low cost and affordability of Alpha College, students still had difficulty paying for text books and had unpaid balances on their student accounts. The “hardship

funds” created by the ALT put a process in place for students to request and secure funds to handle these “total costs” addressed in the completion agenda literature.

Completion agenda research on affordability cautioned higher education to not view increased financial support and affordability as a definitive way to help students succeed. Bettinger (2012) referred to financial aid as a “blunt instrument” for improving student success and completion. While Bettinger and others recognized that reducing cost helps students access higher education, there was limited evidence to suggest affordability helped with persistence and completion (Bettinger, 2012; Mayer, Richburg-Hayes, & Diamond, 2015). The findings from this research support claims made by Bettinger and others. While many students at Alpha College did succeed, the findings demonstrated that many others struggled indicating that simply removing or minimizing the financial barriers was not enough. The research suggested that since factors associated with financial need include such attributes as low-income and first generation status, it is difficult to isolate the affect financial support and affordability has on success and completion (Mayer, Richburg-Hayes, & Diamond, 2015). The completion agenda research and the findings of this study recognized that very often factors beyond finances are often the biggest challenges and contributors to student success and completion.

### **Student Supports**

Cohen, Brawer, and Kisker (2014) noted that community college students differ in many ways from students who matriculate to four-year colleges and universities. As a group, community college students are more likely to balance work, family, and financial insecurity (AACC, 2017; Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). Additionally, a higher



number of community college students are first generation, minority students who are unfamiliar with navigating the complex processes of higher education (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Pearson, 2006). Students with any single or combination of these characteristics made them vulnerable to not succeeding in higher education. Many colleges and universities put support systems in place to help students, but the effectiveness of the traditional supports was limited. The completion agenda literature demanded more supports for students and was explicit about how those supports should be provided.

The College Board argued that students needed more help getting through “the large and complex enterprise that is American higher education” by including student supports that are targeted and mandatory. The problem, according to the research, was that many of the supports put in place for students were available but not mandatory (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins 2015; Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). One of the more powerful supports offered to students was advising, but Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker (2014) noted that other than occasional check-ins, advising remained largely optional. While some community colleges have moved towards more intrusive student advising models (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Hoffhines, 2019; Kalamkarian, Karp, & Ganga, 2017; Karp, Kalamkarian, Klempin, & Fletcher, 2016), the findings of this research revealed that Alpha College implemented an approach promoted in the completion agenda literature and that members of the ALT viewed as key to the design and implementation of Alpha College.

The design of the faculty advisor model emphasized group advising, but the change that was made shortly into implementation shifted the model towards required

individual meetings between the faculty advisor and student throughout the year.

Members of the ALT recognized that this relationship laid the foundation for an intrusive advising model that extended across campus and created a structure for identifying and addressing the ongoing needs of students. While research indicated that intrusive advising models in higher education were still new and being measured, early results have shown promising effects (Kalamkarian, Karp, & Ganga, 2017) and early into implementation, the ALT viewed the faculty advisor approach as impactful.

The added benefit of the faculty advisor model is that students encounter the faculty advisors during classes or in passing between classes breaking down an important obstacle for students. With more traditional models of advising, students need to navigate an entirely different process to schedule and see an advisor. The faculty advisor model was described by the Assistant Dean of Student Success in the following way, “it created a more organic relationship between students and faculty allowing for more frequent interactions”

The findings of this research demonstrated that Alpha College’s faculty advisor model addressed the completion agenda recommendation of moving towards more structured and intrusive advising. The approach was viewed as so impactful that the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs shared her plan to keep the student to faculty advisor ratio at 1:20. Most community colleges cannot sustain that ratio and have not moved to a faculty advisor model; however, Alpha College’s approach and the early positive feedback reinforces the power of the intrusive advising and has implications for practice.

The completion agenda argued for providing students with a limited and structured curriculum suggesting that students would persist and complete at higher rates because they would be less likely to get off track and take courses they did not need which could delay completion (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Pearson, 2006; Scott-Clayton, 2011, &). Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Pearson (2006) suggested that students most at risk were low-income, first generation, minority students with minimal experience in course selection. Alpha College's curriculum was designed to be very structured and limited. Students entered and progressed through Alpha College as a cohort and took a common set of classes with minimal options for electives and class days and times. Students committed to one of only three associate degree options and followed that curriculum as prescribed.

The findings revealed that the limited curriculum of Alpha College was challenged by students in the first cohort who expressed interest in nursing. The ALT responded by expanding its curricular offerings to accommodate the interest of students and further adjusted the curriculum in subsequent years when they discovered that some students desired and could have benefited from more math upon transfer. The Dean and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs cited student need as the motive for the change, but Alpha College risked the clear path provided for students by expanding its offerings.

The expanded curriculum posed the reality that some Alpha College students would extend their completion time beyond two years. The findings of this research indicated that the nursing and pre-STEM tracks required credits beyond the 62 credits of most associate degrees at Alpha College. The nursing and pre-STEM curriculums were

added to the existing associate degrees rather than replacing them or being implemented as a new track. While most community colleges offer multiple associate degrees to accommodate students with various goals (Associate of Arts, Associate of Science, and Associate of Applied Science degrees), Alpha College remained consistent to its design of offering a Liberal Arts focused Associate of Arts degree. By adding the nursing and pre-STEM courses to the Alpha College curriculum, the increased hours risked extending student time to completion. The Associate Dean of Academic Affairs indicated that students who pursued these curriculums may take longer than two years to complete, “and that is ok.” The choice to extend completion beyond two years for an associate’s degree challenged the completion agenda literature on pathways and efficient time to completion, but remained true to Alpha College’s design and mission. It remains to be seen how the expanded curricular choices will impact Alpha College’s emphasis on completion in two years and how the ALT will respond to extended times to completion.

The expansion of Alpha College’s curriculum did not align with completion agenda research on the predicted benefits of a structured curriculum; however, features of Alpha College’s design may help avoid some of the common challenges associated with overwhelming curricular choices. According to Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Pearson (2006) when community colleges expanded their curriculum to increase access and developed more curricular choices, they did not put the supports in place to provide students with the information necessary to adequately consider the choices they faced. The findings of this research suggested that Alpha College may avoid the challenges that come with expanded curricular choices. First, the Dean stated that the motivation behind

the curriculum expansion was not enrollment based, but to address the interests of their students. He remained adamant that Alpha College does not intend to grow beyond its target of 400. Even though the Dean expressed a desire to develop more curricular options for students, the expansion of the curriculum was likely to be limited. Second, the faculty advisor model has the potential to demystify course selection by providing the guidance needed for course selection as the curriculum expands. Third, even with the expansion of the curriculum, the pathway for each curricular track was clearly laid out for students and the choices within each pathway remained limited. While it is possible that Alpha College's expanded curriculum will extend the time to completion, the systems for helping students navigate the curricular choices have been established.

Alpha College also added a first year success course, a common feature of the completion agenda (Cueso, 2015; Greenfield, Keup, & Gardner, 2013; Karp, 2016). This course, as described by the Associate Dean of Student Success, addressed a variety of student success topics and served as an extension of the orientation Alpha College provided to its students; however, the primary focus and function of the course was to facilitate second semester registration. While Alpha College saw increases in fall to spring registration by designated deadlines, research on these types of courses expressed skepticism on their long-term effectiveness (Karp, 2016). Research from Cuseo (2015) argued that these courses were most effective when they moved beyond the extended orientation approach to include more academic content. Alpha College's course design included study skills and time management, but its focus on registration placed it within the courses that have had more short-term benefits than long-term completion results.

The design of Alpha College's curriculum removed developmental coursework and began students immediately in college-level courses which aligned with the completion agenda initiative in which several community colleges and state-wide community college systems eliminated their developmental coursework (Anson & Scherer, 2014; Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Long 2012). The rationale was based in research that argued that developmental education was an obstacle to completion (Complete College America, 2012). Since the majority of students who enrolled at community colleges required at least one developmental education course, it delayed time to completion and very often, especially for students who needed multiple developmental courses, became an insurmountable obstacle (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). Additionally, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) indicated that the long-term, effectiveness of developmental courses was "equivocal" at best (NCES, 2016, p. 5). Rethinking how and if developmental coursework should be a part of the curriculum was evident throughout completion agenda literature (Bailey, 2009; Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Bettinger, Boatman, & Long, 2013; Kurlaender & Howell, 2012; Levin & Calcagno, 2008).

While the findings of this study revealed that students at Alpha College struggled academically, there were minimal indicators that the elimination of developmental coursework was a contributing factor. The ALT attributed the lack of success to students not possessing self-advocacy and grit or based on their high school of origin, and during the curriculum changes that Alpha College went through during implementation no required developmental courses were added to address perceived needs in this area.

Alpha College's choice to eliminate developmental course work aligned with the access mission of admitting college ready students and its approach to offering a structured curriculum in which all courses counted towards graduation. The elimination of developmental coursework was a controversial initiative of the completion agenda and continued to generate additional research (Scherer & Anson, 2014; Venezia & Hughes, 2014). Alpha College's approach to eliminating developmental coursework and only admitting college ready students is likely to provoke additional conversations about how community colleges view developmental coursework.

When developmental coursework was eliminated or accelerated, students needed to be supported with tutoring and other support services. The research suggested that rather than delay students with additional developmental coursework, they be pushed into more advanced classes and supported with services. The findings of this study presented an ALT that was responsive to the support students needed in the classroom. While the ALT initially struggled to get students to seek the support they needed, they devised the peer-tutoring program that met the needs of the students by offering an experience that accommodated student schedules and removed the stigma often associated with seeking support services. The findings of this research advocated for student-friendly responses to tutoring and support.

### **Leadership**

Research on the completion agenda suggested that perhaps the single most contributing factor to helping students succeed and complete was strong leadership. Leaders needed to engage in transformational change and make hard choices about who

will be served, what priorities will be set, and what outcomes will be pursued (AACC, 2012). The design of Alpha College and the decisions the ALT made during implementation stressed the importance of focusing on a singular mission and remaining focused. Decisions made by the ALT were a series of choices that prioritized design features of Alpha College that best served the target student population and ushered them towards completion. The ALT limited access and continued to limit access during ongoing reviews of its admission process. While the choices eliminated access to students, Alpha College's mission and focus on a single population of students was clear. When the curriculum expanded to meet the needs of students, they held firm to their Liberal Arts focus. Partnerships pursued and relationships developed were to provide students with holistic supports or financial resources they needed to succeed. Completion agenda research did not indicate where the focus of community colleges would need to shift during the completion agenda, but they were called to rethink their mission and potentially focus more on a narrowed vision (AACC, 2012; Stout 2016). Alpha College was designed without the distraction of multiple associate degree offerings, providing community education courses, or career training—all of which are included in the mission of most community colleges. The design of Alpha College allowed it to focus on its singular mission and contributes to the research on making the case for a more focused mission for community colleges.

During the completion agenda, there were no shortage of initiatives implemented nationally that attempted to help students succeed. The problem was that most of the initiatives were identified and developed by a small number of enthusiastic early adopters



and champions on campus and impacted only a small number of students (Bailey, 2017; Stout, 2016). The changes made were not significant, did not gain support across campus, and resulted in minimal impact (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015). Leaders needed to create a campus culture that emphasized completion and established completion as a shared responsibility across campus (AACC, 2014; Aspen Institute, 2015). This was the only way, according to the research, that initiatives would expand beyond the niche programs and small pockets of impact and reach scale to impact all students (Stout, 2016).

Alpha College created a culture of completion and through its design reached all students at scale. Alpha College's culture of completion permeated the entire campus through its hiring practices and collaborative decision-making. The Associate Dean of Academic Affairs described that the faculty advisor positions are hired based on their ability to engage students in the classroom and to serve as mentors and advisors. The findings indicated that faculty are only hired who buy into the mission and are willing to work with Alpha College's student population. The findings were also clear that this relationship served as the foundation for relationships with the students that extended all the way up to the Dean. The decision-making process of the ALT created a culture in which the entire campus assumed shared responsibility for the success of students. The collaborative nature of the ALT and the sharing of information across campus prioritized a collective approach to helping students succeed over people adhering to the traditional confines of their position (Manning, 2012).

Alpha College benefited from the advantage of size. Alpha College was implemented at scale. All students who gained access to Alpha College had the same resources available to them and the same requirements. Some community colleges have instituted mandatory advising for small groups of students, but Alpha College required it of all students. While first year seminar courses grew in popularity, most places did not require the course of all students like Alpha College. For many reasons, community colleges lacked the ability to offer or require initiatives at scale. The findings of this study demonstrated that Alpha College was designed and implemented to offer all services at scale and provided a strong portrait of how a college operated at scale.

### **Re-engaging the Iron Triangle**

The ALT made decisions during implementation that were informed by the mission to provide access to an affordable education for traditionally underrepresented students in an environment that provided holistic supports from entry through completion. Each decision reinforced the design of Alpha College and focused on maintaining a balance of access, affordability, and student supports. When the decision-making of the ALT is considered by re-engaging the concept of the iron triangle and trade-off analysis, the decisions made to balance access, affordability, and student supports led to trade-offs in which decisions made about one of the three themes impacted one or both of the other themes. These decisions and the trade-offs demonstrated a prioritization of the ALT and helped further identify and define their mission.

The ALT made decisions during implementation to reinforce the competitive and limited access process, and by doing so they prioritized access to a target population central to their mission. These choices to limit access to Alpha College omitted groups of students, but was central to defining who Alpha College served which included low-income, minority students traditionally left behind in higher education. But some of the access decisions did impact the affordability of Alpha College. The choice to serve and welcome undocumented students provides an example of how balancing the sides of the triangle played out in the ALT's decision making. Alpha College committed to providing access to undocumented students; however, the affordability model of Alpha College was not compatible with access for undocumented students. When the ALT expressed a desire to increase the percentage of students who received financial aid from 88% to 98% and made the decision to conduct a pre-review of students prior to an interview to determine financial need, undocumented students were affected. Since undocumented students are not eligible for financial aid, the refined process that focused on financial need put undocumented students at a disadvantage. Alpha College was committed to providing access to these students, decisions needed to be made about another side of the triangle. In order to support undocumented students, an increase in donor support would be needed. The only financial support undocumented students could receive was from private donors since they were not eligible for aid and had difficulty participating in the work program. The commitment to undocumented students put additional pressure on the need for Alpha College to secure more donor support to achieve their access and affordability mission; however, the additional pressure was acceptable because their

mission to provide access to undocumented students was central to the mission of Alpha College.

Decisions made to expand the curriculum and maintain a 1:20 faculty advisor to student ratio demonstrated a commitment to providing student supports and being responsive to student needs. These decisions about student supports had a potential impact on the affordability of Alpha College. Alpha College will take on additional costs to hire the faculty needed to teach the new courses and support the intrusive advising model. These additional costs were noted by the Associate Dean of Academic Affairs, who was adamant about moving forward despite the additional costs. It was not clear how the additional costs would be covered, but the costs will have some impact on the financial model and affordability of Alpha College especially as the support from the parent university shifts and Alpha College becomes more responsible for financing its own resources. But the choice was made to move forward to prioritize the mission of supporting students and being responsive to their needs.

The expanded curriculum is likely to impact the affordability of Alpha College for students. If students choose to enroll in either the pre-nursing program or STEM program at Alpha College they will be required to take 71 credits instead of the 62 that were part of the design. The more courses a student takes, the longer they will be enrolled and the more expensive their education becomes. Additionally, more advising and other supports are needed for STEM courses which traditionally have higher failure rates. While the ALT recognized that students will need to complete more credits, may take longer than two years to complete, and may require additional supports, they expressed confidence in

their decision, a decision which revealed a prioritization of their mission. The additional courses, while potentially more expensive and extending time to completion, demonstrated that the ALT was not willing to remove the Liberal Arts and mission focused courses that were part of their curriculum and accounted for the additional credits that students would need to take as a result of adding the pre-nursing and STEM programs.

The following represented a sample of how trade-offs and the iron triangle played out in the decision making of the ALT during the implementation of Alpha College. The decisions made demonstrate the priorities of the ALT and help identify and define the mission of Alpha College.

### **Implications for Practice**

As a result of examining the findings in the context of the completion agenda, there are implications that this research may have for practice.

The power of the faculty advisor model was noted by Alpha College's ALT and aligned with completion agenda research. The faculty advisors at Alpha College were the foundation for engaging students, making them feel they belonged in higher education, and served as a way for student needs to be identified and addressed. The College Transition Advisor noted that without the faculty advisors, Alpha College would not work. Replicating the faculty advisor model of Alpha College is simply not practical for most community colleges. Alpha College's size allowed for the model to be implemented and the commitment to the model has indicated that the ratio of faculty advisors to student will remain at 1 to 20. The action for community colleges across the nation would

be to look for ways to achieve an increased level of intrusiveness. The impact of the Alpha College model is that it leads to the intrusiveness that the completion agenda literature calls for and results in an intimate understanding of student needs. Any approach that can make the college-going experience more personalized for the student can approximate the faculty advisor model of Alpha College.

Funding for higher education must be addressed to become more stable and predictable. Alpha College has created a model focused on affordability, but its dependence on the unstable sources of donor support and state and federal funding presents risks for long term sustainability. Completion agenda research argued that the costs of higher education are increasing at rates that will exceed the increases allocated for student aid. Not only will Alpha College's financial model be threatened if student aid continues at the current trajectory, all students who benefit from financial aid will suffer. Reliance upon donor support is equally risky as donor support can often fluctuate. Documents relevant to the completion agenda argued that higher education leaders need to be proactive about lobbying for increases in student funding and need to rethink how student aid is dispersed. Based on the findings of this research, the sources of funding need to become more stable and predictable if the affordability problem of higher education is going to be addressed.

The findings of this research reopen discussions about access and community colleges. Research on the completion agenda and current practice has not revealed any indication that community colleges will move towards limited and competitive access any time soon; however, Alpha College's practices should prompt conversations about

how community colleges can continue to operate as inclusive, open institutions while making some determinations prior to entry about students' ability to benefit from the curriculum and services offered. Should community colleges, prior to entry, conduct better assessments of students to reasonably predict whether or not students can be successful? And what ethical concerns are posed of continuing the practice of open door access and admitting students who are predicted to not be successful?

Alpha College demonstrated advantages of an institution operating effectively with a singular, focused mission to which an entire faculty and staff is committed. The mission of the comprehensive community college is vast and often filled with conflicting priorities. The ability to serve transfer students, career program students, and continuing education while also being responsive to the needs of the community can be an overwhelming proposition. There may be benefits to comprehensive community colleges engaging in a process of revisiting or refocusing its mission.

Replication of Alpha College's model has already manifested at one mid-western private university who opened a small two-year college on their campus. Alpha College, Guttman Community College, and this newest college represent a new model of higher education that may continue to grow as these institutions continue to operate and their effectiveness and viability is demonstrated. Other large universities and systems may desire to learn more about these models and engage in their own replication efforts.

### **Future Research**

First, the instrumental case study approach to the research provided an effective methodology for a deep understanding of Alpha College's design and implementation

within the context of and as a response to the completion agenda, but it is limited in its generalizability. The unique and novel features of Alpha College as a new, small private two-year school make the ability to generalize even more difficult. While the case study yielded some recommendations for practice, different research methodologies could provide more meaningful and applicable results. Comparative case-studies with Guttman Community College or comprehensive community colleges may yield more relevant findings for what higher education can learn from the unique model of Alpha College.

Second, this research was not an evaluation of Alpha College and its model. There was no data collected to determine if the design features, interventions, or approaches were effective. Some quantitative and qualitative information was shared during observations and interviews, but the focus of the research was not to evaluate Alpha College. Though many features of Alpha College show promise, future experimental and quasi-experimental research to determine the effectiveness of Alpha College's specific initiatives would prove beneficial to Alpha College and others. This case study proves information about Alpha College's design and implementation that can serve as a foundation for more evaluative research studies.

Third, Alpha College and its parent university are religiously-affiliated institutions. Since this research was focused on the completion agenda and positioned Alpha College within the context of comprehensive community colleges and how they responded to the completion agenda, the faith-based mission of Alpha College and how it informed its design and practice was intentionally not included within the scope of this research. A study of Alpha College from the perspective of faith-based education would



be an important contribution to understanding Alpha College and how it fits within a larger tradition.

Fifth, this research focused on gathering data from the ALT. The voices and perspectives represented in this study were from a limited number of people who interacted with Alpha College in a very distinct way. Adding the student and faculty advisor voice would lend very different perspectives on how Alpha College operated. Perspectives and perceptions from the Alpha College Board, the parent university, and the community could offer different insights. Also, the voices and experiences of Alpha College's large number of underrepresented students, including undocumented students, could provide insight into diversity, equity, and inclusion in community colleges.

Sixth, a rich area for future research is exploring what happens in the classroom at Alpha College. This research did not solicit the faculty advisor voice nor did it discuss pedagogical approaches and whether or not Alpha College differs in any significant way in how faculty approach the classroom. The Associate Dean of Academic Affairs discussed criteria used when hiring faculty, but what strategies faculty use, how they interact with students, and how the relationships pay out in the classroom is a fertile area for future research.

Finally, this study provided a detailed look at Alpha College, introduced Guttman Community College, and alluded to a replication effort of Alpha College's model. Future research can focus on considering these models collectively and consider how they are defined within the broader context of higher education. The Dean suggested that Alpha College is a "game changer" and contributes to a "reinvention" of higher education.

These new institutions share qualities of comprehensive community colleges, but are also distinct in important ways. They are not four-year colleges or universities, yet they are deeply connected to those institutions. Do they emerge as extensions of the public community college system? Will they remain inextricably linked and connected to a larger university or system? Or will these models emerge and be defined as a new system within higher education?

### **The Completion Agenda Framework**

The completion agenda and the themes of access, affordability, and student supports were selected *a priori* and provided a framework for my research on Alpha College. The use of this framework served the purpose of the study well by providing a context within which Alpha College could be understood as a response to the completion agenda. The instrumental case study approach was chosen to support this purpose as it allowed me to focus on both the case of Alpha College and the broader context of the completion agenda. By framing the design and implementation of Alpha College within the context of and as a response to the completion agenda themes of access, affordability, and student success, the findings could be used to inform the completion work of community colleges. Stake (1995) argued that case study research gains its generalizability through the reader, who discovers ways to apply the findings to his or her own context. The completion agenda provided a familiar framework that would be understood by community college professionals and increase the potential for generalizability and applicability to the completion work of other community colleges.

The use of the completion agenda themes, while useful for the purposes of this study, did have limitations. The deductive approach of beginning with access, affordability, and student supports in many ways determined the outcomes of the research. Each of the findings were mapped to those themes and limited other themes from emerging. An inductive approach to the research could have provided a framework that allowed different themes to emerge from the research such as the faith based mission of Alpha College, the role of co-curricular activities in student success, and more on the model of the faculty advisor role as critical to supporting students. The findings from an inductive approach would likely reveal features about the design and implementation of Alpha College that were beyond the *a priori* selected themes of the completion agenda, and would be more reflective of what the ALT thought was important during the design and implementation rather than how the design and implementation was a response to the completion agenda.

### **Conclusion**

Community colleges have already begun moving the student success discourse beyond the completion agenda. Community colleges were first charged with increasing access to higher education in the middle of the twentieth-century. Once access was provided, the focus became helping more students who accessed community colleges successfully complete. Now, the trend is moving towards post-credential success. The value of a community college credential is increasingly being tied to labor market values and transfer success of students. But the reality remains that many students still are not

successfully completing, and the students still most at risk of not completing are low-income, minority students. Those challenges still need to be addressed.

What can be learned from Alpha College to address those continued challenges?

The unique design of Alpha College, specifically its exceptionally small size, not only makes it difficult to see connections for comprehensive community colleges but makes it easy to characterize Alpha College as an outlier and dismiss the model as not having anything to offer other two-year schools. But when we immediately dismiss Alpha College, we avoid some of the difficult conversations that Alpha College can provoke.

As leaders at community colleges continue to address student success challenges and support students from entry through completion, they can look to Alpha College as a model that was designed to serve students most at risk of not being successful and most in need of intrusive supports. Alpha College made decisions from design to implementation that reinforced and were informed by a focused mission. While most community colleges cannot adopt Alpha College's model, strong leaders can use the mission-focused approach of Alpha College to guide their own decision making. Leaders can engage in efforts to both refine the mission of community colleges and define a decision making process that is driven by mission.

Moving forward, community college leaders will have to continue developing and committing to missions focused on access, completion, and post-graduation success, which will only increase the complexity of decision making. Within this complexity, community college leaders need to be unafraid to make difficult decisions focused on a mission to serve students, their institutions, and their communities.

APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

From: Knetl, Brian  
Sent: Tuesday, February 5, 2019 7:19 PM  
To: Subject: Research

Hello, \_\_\_\_\_.

You may remember me from my time observing the [Administrative Leadership Team at Alpha College]. During my observations, I became very interested in the [Alpha College] model and decided to pursue a dissertation on its design and implementation for completion of my Doctorate of Education degree in the School of Education at Loyola University.

The purpose of my study is to gain a detailed understanding of the design of [Alpha College] and how decisions made by the [ALT] during the first two years of implementation provided students access to an affordable education with holistic supports to facilitate student success.

I am hoping you will agree, as your schedule allows, to participate in a 60 to 90 minute semi-structured interview held at a time and place mutually agreed upon. During the interview, you will be asked questions about your role on the [ALT] and decisions made by the group about features of the college related to access, affordability and student supports. You may also be asked questions about how those three elements were balanced to meet the college's mission and best assist students with meeting their educational goals. A set of interview questions will be provided in advance, but follow-up questions may be asked based on responses to the questions provided. I would like to record the interview (if you provide consent for recording).

Every measure will be taken to protect the identity of the participants. Recordings, transcripts, and any notes will only be for my use and will be discarded after my study is complete. You may be identifiable by your voice in the recording or by the nature of your position at [Alpha College], but the name of the institution, parent institution, and all persons involved in the research are assigned pseudonyms and are not be identifiable in the collection, storage or reporting of data. You will be identified in the dissertation text as either a member of the administrative leadership team, by a pseudonym, or by your job title.

During the interview, you may choose to not answer any question or to withdraw from participation at any time. You can share any information you wish, and you are free not to participate in the study at all.

I am hoping to schedule the interviews on February 12th, 13th, 14th, and 18th. I am free any time from 8am until 6pm on all of those days. If you agree to participate, please respond at your earliest convenience to suggest a few day and time options that would

accommodate your schedule on the days listed above. If you are not available during any of the suggested days and times, I'll be happy to offer other options.

If you have any questions, please contact me by responding to this email. If you prefer, you may call me at ###-###-####. I am working under the supervision of my dissertation director, who can also be contacted with questions or concerns \_\_\_\_\_.

I will follow up with an email reminder in one week.

Kind regards,  
Brian Knetl

### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

**Project Title:** From design to implementation: A case study of a new two-year college.

**Researcher(s):** Brian Knetl

**Faculty Sponsor:** Charles Tocci

**Introduction:**

You are being asked to take part in a research study being conducted by Brian Knetl for a dissertation under the supervision of Charles Tocci in the School of Education at Loyola University of Chicago.

You are being asked to participate because the dissertation examines the design of a new two-year college and the decisions made by the administrative leadership team during implementation of the college, and you are a member of the administrative leadership team at that institution. Some members of the administrative leadership team from 2015-2017 are being asked to participate.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before deciding whether to participate in the study.

**Purpose:**

The purpose of this study is to gain a detailed understanding of the design of a new two-year college and how decisions made by the administrative leadership team during the first two years of implementation provided students access to an affordable education with holistic supports to facilitate student success.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to participate in a 60-90 minute semi-structured interview. The interviews may be recorded (if consent is provided) and will be held at a time and place mutually agreed upon by the interviewer and interviewee.

During the interview, you will be asked questions about your role on the administrative leadership team and about specific decisions made by that team about features of the college related to access, affordability and student supports. You may also be asked questions about how those three elements were balanced to meet the college's mission and best assist students with meeting their educational goals. A set of interview questions will be provided in advance, but follow-up questions may be asked based on responses to the questions provided.

**Risks/Benefits:**

There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study beyond those experienced in everyday life.

There are no direct benefits to you from participation in this study, but the results will provide an outsiders' reflection on the design and implementation of Arrupe College, and may provide guidance and insight for other institutions with a similar mission.



**Confidentiality:**

Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed but every measure will be taken to protect the identity of the subjects involved in the study. The unique structure of the institution being researched may compromise confidentiality; however, the name of the institution, parent institution, and all persons involved in the study will be assigned pseudonyms and will not be identifiable in the collection, storage or reporting of data. You will be identified in the dissertation text as either a member of the administrative leadership team, by a pseudonym, or by your job title. All data will be stored on the researcher's password protected hard drive and on a single flash drive. After completion of the dissertation and conferral of degree—all interview data will be discarded. Consent forms, per Loyola University's policy, will be kept indefinitely. The consent forms will be stored on an external drive accessible only by the researcher.

**Voluntary Participation:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.

**Contacts and Questions:**

If you have questions about this research study, please feel free to contact Brian Knetl at 708-227-0604 or [bknetl@luc.edu](mailto:bknetl@luc.edu). You may also contact Charles Tocci, faculty sponsor of the project at [ctocci@luc.edu](mailto:ctocci@luc.edu).

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689.

**Statement of Consent:**

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Do you consent to audio recording?

\_\_\_\_\_ No, I understand the researcher will take notes.

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I consent to audio recording.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Loyola University Chicago/Lakeside Campuses  
Institutional Review Board for  
The Protection of Human Subjects

Date of Approval: 2/4/2019

Approval Expires: 2/4/2020

APPENDIX B  
OBSERVATION TEMPLATE

Date:

Event: ALT Meeting

Location:

Persons Involved:

Notes Prepared by: Brian Knetl

Time	Agenda Item and Notes	Thoughts/Comments

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## VITA

Brian Knetl is the son of Thomas and Cathy Knetl. He was born in Munster, Indiana on November 28, 1972. Brian grew up in Lansing, IL where he attended elementary, middle and high school. He graduated from Saint Mary's University of Minnesota in 1994 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Theatre. In 1995 he earned a Master of Arts degree in Theatre from Texas State University. He currently resides in Homewood, IL with his wife, Amy, and four children, Thomas, Jack, Lillian, and Charles.

Brian began his career in higher education in 1999 as an Assistant Professor in the Theatre Arts Department and Honors Program at his alma mater, Saint Mary's University. He was Chair of Theatre Arts from 2004-2006. In 2007, Brian accepted an administrative position at Moraine Valley Community College in Palos Heights, IL where he served as the Assistant Dean of Liberal Arts and Director of Arts. In 2009, Brian went to Harper College in Palatine, IL where he currently serves as the Associate Provost. Prior to his current role, he served as Dean of Liberal Arts and founding Associate Dean of the Center for Adjunct Faculty Engagement. At Harper, Brian provides leadership for several programs including International Education, the first year seminar program, and learning communities. Additionally, he provides leadership for Harper's Academy for Teaching Excellence and high school partnerships. Brian was also an Aspen Presidential Fellow for Community College Leadership.

## DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

The Dissertation submitted by Brian Knetl has been read and approved by the following committee:

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